

Method of product placement in computer games. Qualitative research amongst Polish players

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, new technologies enable practitioners to create brand experience in the virtual world of computer games. Marketers use product placement to reach potential and current customers. In the meantime, computer games have become an attractive medium because they attract an increasingly wider audience of different genders and various age groups. Therefore, an important issue is to know and systematize current methods of brand placement in computer games. For the purpose, the author carried out 20 in-depth interviews with players of chosen computer games, Second Life, Euro Truck Simulator 2 and The Sims. According to the analysis, it can be distinguished by the following typology: place of brand placement (before logging, inside the game, in separate windows, and on external websites), brand availability (paid brand appearance and free brand appearance), the source of brand placement (game producer, organizations, and players), virtual forms of promotion (advertising, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion, and word-of-mouth marketing), the degree of use of the branded product in game (full use and limited use of the branded product). The presented paper contributes to the theory of marketing communication and branding.

JEL classification: M31

Keywords: product placement, placement method, placement strategy, in-game advertising, brand

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consumers often buy brands instead of their products such as cars, shoes or clothes (Kolny, Kucia, Stolecka, 2011). The brand performs a number of important functions: it distinguishes the company offer from competitive offers, provides the consumer with distinctive functional and/or symbolic benefits, they enable to create a loyal group of buyers and achieve a leading position on the market (Kall, 2001). Therefore, every organization wants to build a brand, companies in the sector of high technology, industrial goods, semi-finished products, services, B2B, pharmaceutical laboratories, and non-governmental organizations as well as non-profit organizations (Kapferer, 2012).

Growing ranks of scientists noticed the meaningful role of brand experience in the process of creating a brand (Iglesias, Markovic, Rialp, 2019). Brand experience is the subjective, internal response of consumers (affective, cognitive) and behavioral reactions evoked by brand-related stimuli. Sensory organs such as sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell lead to sensory experiences. The sensory experiences, by generating pleasure and a feeling of excitement, add value to the brand and distinguish it from competition. If a consumer recalls the brand, emotional reactions of the consumer are stimulated. Research conducted in the field of experience marketing indicates the existence of a relationship between emotions and behavioral intentions in consumers. Positive behavioral experiences can remain in the consumer's memory for a long time, which maximizes the effectiveness of marketing activities (Girish, Lee, 2019). For example an in Santander Bank was created with innovative design, intelligent lighting and air-conditioning systems, improving customer service and increasing comfort. The bank has also developed visual and audio systems to improve the experience of the elderly as well as people with disabilities (Iglesias, Markovic, Rialp, 2019).

In recent years, practitioners have made great progress in creating online brand experience (Yu, Yuan, 2019). An interactive environment enables building a relationship, engage customers, encourages trust, and is able to deliver greater value to consumers (Hamzah, Alwi, Othman, 2014). The next step towards new technologies is the creation of brand experiences in the virtual world of a computer's game through brand placement (Tikkanen, Hietanen, Henttonen, Rokka, 2009). Computer games offer virtual reality where the user has a sense of being (Roettl, Terlutter, 2018). Virtual reality allows to create experiences characterized by a high degree of immersion, i.e. a deep state of player involvement (Hudson, Matson-Barkat, Pallamin, Jegou, 2019). Computer games have several unique features that are missing in traditional media such as television or newspapers. A computer game with a placed brand is played many times, for many years. The brand itself can also appear many times during one game (Techawachirakul, 2020). In addition, traditional media often suffers from a poor possibility to gain attention of the audience. For example, while watching television people frequently prepare meals, check emails or browse the web on other devices. Games require from players to be more focused to achieve goals. Another benefit in computer games is the lack of possibility to skip the advertising message because the brand is integrated with the content of the game or installed ad blockers. The advantage of brand placement in games is also the option of dynamic placement. Dynamic placement allows to modify the brand display after the game is released (Herrewijn, Poels, 2017). Despite many advantages, the type of product placement also has some limitations. Concerns are largely related to the placement project, which may be perceived by the recipient as intrusive. Organizations therefore face the problem of optimally designing campaigns in computer games that will allow them to achieve their goals. On the other hand, many doubts raise ethical issues, such as persuasive messages aimed at children (Eagle, Dahl, 2018; Sharma, Bumb, 2020). At the same time, many scholars indicated the need of conducting research taking into account various methods, or in other words, strategies, of brand placement in computer games and the impact of the strategies on brand response (e.g. Huang, Yang, 2012; Poels, Janssens, Herrewijn, 2013; Tran, Strutton, 2013; Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, Arpan, 2006). Taking it into consideration, the present paper is aimed at identification of current methods of brand placement in computer games, characteristics of the identified method and an attempt to create their typology. The author asked the following research questions. What are the popular brand placement methods according to players? How are the methods described by players? Are there any regularities in the above-mentioned brand placement methods that allow them to be grouped into specific types? To provide satisfactory answers, the author conducted 20 in-depth interviews with players of three chosen

computer games, namely Second Life (SL), Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2) and The Sims. The presented study is a part of the research project titled “Brand introduction into virtual worlds of computer game as a form of customer engagement” which received funding from Poland’s National Science Centre (Preludium 17, 2019/33/N/HS4/01530).

The present paper is organized as follows. The first section presents the issue of product placement in computer games. The second section contains the research method. After that, the sample and results of qualitative study are described. The paper ends with a discussion and final conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The definition of product placement has evolved over the years. According to one of the first product placement is “a paid, intentional and unobtrusive message about a branded product embedded in a movie or television show” (Jan, Martina 2013). Patel and Patel (2015) supplemented the definition with the statement that the message is embedded in a film or TV show in order to influence the audience. Recently product placement is defined as “the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and or visual means within mass media programming” (Patel, Patel, 2015).

Product placement appeared on television in the 1950s, and in the 1990s it was adapted to the virtual environment of computer games. Just like in movies, products or brands appearing inside games improve a sense of realism into plot (Winkler, Buckner, 2006). This is how the Pizza Hut and KFC brands appeared inside the Crazy Taxi and AX game or Nokia in Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory (Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, Aldás-Manzano, 2017). In 2006, Coca-Cola bought its own island inside a virtual world of Second Life (SL). The purpose of the presence of the brand inside the game was to promote the brand and create its own community. SL residents visited the so-called “Coke Studio” to record music, buy virtual products and get free, virtual gadgets such as Coca-Cola drinks (Endra Sharma, Baoku, Juan, 2011). During an election campaign in 2008, banners promoting the candidacy of Barack Obama were placed in various sports games, e.g. Burnout Paradise, EA SPORTS NBA Live 09. In research conducted by Walsh, Clavio, Mullane, Whisenant (2014) Barack Obama recall and recognition indices after displaying in-game placement reached a similar value to such brands as McDonald’s or Nike (Batra, 2009; Walsh, Clavio, Mullane, Whisenant, 2014).

There are a few product placement methods in computer games indicated in current literature. Kuhn and Pope (2010) distinguished visual placement, auditory placement and plot connected placement (Kuhn, Pope, 2010). Visual placement is when a brand appears as the background to an action. Auditory placement refers to a situation when a brand is mentioned during a dialogue. Plot related placement refers to placement based on integrating the brand with the plot (story) of e.g. movie, show or game. They also indicated use-simulated placements and peripheral placement. Use-simulated placements is when brand constitutes an active game element and a player is involved in activities related to the branded product. The brand can be for example a part of characters’ equipment, selected and changed by the player. It makes the player involved in activities related to the branded product. Peripheral placement is placing the brand in the background as a passive prop (Kuhn, Pope, 2010).

Nelson (2002) listed the following brand uses in computer games: sponsoring, brands as a part of game-play (equipment, tools), a brand as a character inside the game, background advertisements as self-promotion for a game or other publisher’s games, background advertisements and product placements (e.g. billboards), game-players’ own advertisements (brands through customization), background music of well-known groups.

Sponsoring uses advertising banners to initiate brand awareness and strengthen brand liking. It also allows to link the banner and the website, and thus quickly transfer the game users, with one click, to the sponsor’s offer. A brand can be featured as a branded product and be part of a game-play, e.g. BMW cars that players could drive around the race track. A placement strategy often uses images of famous characters, real or fictional. Such a character often has certain props. They are items marked with brands that are very well matched to the character’s image. It is also common to use in-game advertising for self-promotion of games or publishers. Another strategy is to let the player customize the game by selecting the brands that will appear in the game. A game developer provides a set of brands available within the game, from which the player can choose which one appears in their game. As the last method of brand placement, the author indicates the sounds that can be heard during the

game, music by popular groups and voices of famous sports commentators. A specific sound can be identified with a particular brand (Nelson, 2002, Nelson 2005).

Lee and Faber (2007) divided product placement strategies according to congruity, namely: product-game congruity, functional congruity, lifestyle congruity, image congruity, advertising congruity. Brand placement methods may differ in the degree of compliance of the product (brand) and the plot of the game (product-game congruity). Functional congruity is when the category of the advertised product in the game is the central object used in the context of the game. Lifestyle congruity refers to the relationship between the lifestyle of players engaging in the game and the lifestyle associated with the product or brand. Image congruity occurs when the image of the product category is consistent with the image presented in the game. Advertising congruity is when the product category of the brand being placed appears to be adequately advertised in the context of the game (Lee, Faber, 2007).

Lee and Faber (2007) also propose focal placement and peripheral placement. Some brands are placed in the central point of the game (focal placement), others are placed in the background of the action (peripheral placement) (Lee, Faber, 2007);

Heng-Li and Cheng-Shu (2008) described three following product placement strategy: a brand as a tool used in the game (operator), a brand as a result of a specific action, e.g. a well-aimed shot (feedback), a brand as a reward for an in-game achievement (goal). The brand in a form of a tool (operator) when it is located directly on props such as a knife, a cape. If a player shows a certain behavior, previously defined as desirable or undesirable, as a feedback effect they will be rewarded or punished (feedback) (Heng-Li, Cheng-Shu, 2008).

Methods of product placement can be also divided according to brand visibility to: prominent placement and subtle placement. The brand is prominent when a product or logo is at the center of the game scene by its size or location on the screen. The opposite is subtle placement (Vashisht, Pillai, 2016).

Product placement can also take the form of animated billboards and static ads. Moving and flashing elements direct the audience's attention to a particular part of the screen (Huang, Yang, 2012).

Ghirvu (2013) indicated static in-game advertising and dynamic in-game advertising. Static in-game advertising is placed before the game is released to the market and cannot be modified or changed in the future. Dynamic advertising allows to modify advertising spots at any time and display them to an audience based on the demographic information associated with players (Ghirvu, 2013).

The brand placement method can be also considered from the point of view of Kotler's (1994) four forms of promotion, namely advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and non-standard forms, e.g. word-of-mouth communication (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2009; Laskowska-Witek, Mitreęga, 2014).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Between August 21, 2018, and December 5, 2018 the author conducted 20 in-depth interviews. Because it was not possible to reach the whole group of Polish players, purposive sampling was applied. Instead, a small set of users was examined (Babbie, 2003). At the time of starting the study, composition of the respondent group was not known yet. After interviews, respondents were asked about the recommendation of possible subsequent players. The snowball method was chosen because respondents with a large number of social connections can provide other respondents with similar characteristics (Etikan, Alkassim, and Abubakar, 2016). The participants of the study were adult users of simulation computer games who played a particular game not later than six months before participating in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted on a relatively small sample, which makes it impossible to qualify a large number of games for the study. Therefore, it was decided to choose three simulation computer games, namely Second Life (SL), Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2) and The Sims (TS). It was suspected that games simulated real life offering a favorable environment for brand placement in a variety of ways. In addition, the chosen games had been present on the market for a few years before the research. It allows to include into the sample well experience players who spend in virtual environment enough time to describe featured in game brands.

Second Life (SL) is one of the most popular and widely studied virtual worlds. It is diverse space divided into regions, containing geographic forms from the real world, such as islands, buildings, and institutions. Users can create avatars according to their own preferences, private virtual spaces,

and objects like houses and clothes (Dethridge, Quinn, 2016; Laskowska-Witek, Mitreġa, 2014; Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, Chen, 2011). Second Life has a virtual economy and its own currency (Partala, 2011). Users can buy and sell virtual and real products using Linden Dollars (L\$), they are exchangeable against the US dollar. Scholars recognize many business endeavors in the game, e.g. advertising, organizing meetings and conferences, training and recruitment, and testing new products (Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, Chen, 2011).

In Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2), players can drive a vehicle and complete a series of repetitive tasks like making deliveries (Leino, 2018). The game environment depicts the real world in such a way that players are under the impression that they really move with a truck on real European roads (www.eurotrucksimulator2.com, retrieved 6.01.2019).

The Sims (TS) is one of the best-selling computer simulation games. Players impersonate a virtual character and create a virtual family called the Sims, decorate their homes with furniture and appliances, and help them find jobs. The characters cannot speak and only interact via gestures and a nonsensical language called Simlish (Ranalli, 2008). Table 1 shows the number of respondents representing each game.

Table 1

Number of interviewed users of individual games

	Number of interviewed players
Second Life	11
Euro Truck Simulator 2	5
The Sims 1-4	4
Total	20

Source: Author's elaboration

Participants were recruited for the study through the social networking site Facebook from among subscribers to fan pages of the chosen video games. They were systematically invited depending on which game users were needed in the study. The data was collected as long as theoretical saturation was obtained, and further interviews would not bring new information about the investigated phenomenon (Jemielniak, 2012).

Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and anonymous participation at the time of receiving an invitation. In order to avoid influencing the course of the interviews, the aim of the study was presented in general as "building knowledge about marketing aspects of video games for scientific purposes". Interviews were conducted mainly electronically via voice chat and in person. Due to the territorial dispersion of respondents, the electronic form of interviews was predominant. The interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes.

The interviews were conducted according to a prepared scenario. Each interview began with general questions about games and then the focus of attention gradually shifted to more specific topics. As introduction, there were asked questions about the players' experience, i.e. how long users played the game, how frequently they play and how long a single game lasts. Respondents were also asked about their motivation to start the game, i.e. why they chose a particular game. After that, they were asked about some similarities between virtual and real life, especially if they met some places or objects. Participants frequently talked about cities or landscapes that depicted the same cities or places from the real world. Moreover, they listed places like restaurants or roads and objects like cars or clothes. At this stage, respondents frequently listed names of restaurants or cars and mentioned branded products. When they did not, further questions raised: "What else have you seen in the virtual world?" or "What about some places, maybe objects?" If a brand's name did not appear, participants were asked about branded products or firms that they met inside a game's environment. When players indicated a particular brand's name, their attention was directed to descriptions about when and how these brands appeared. They were asked where the brand (branded product) appeared and what were they doing at this time. Respondents should also declare if they used branded product or not

and how they used branded product. Based on obtained responses the subsequent questions were asked. The final part of interview constitutes questions about age, place of residents, players' education and occupation. Each interview was recorded, and then transcribed. In order to obtain a high level of accuracy, as suggest Miles and Huberman (2000), all statements were written down in detail, including interviewees' breaks for reflection and incorrect statements (e.g. incomplete sentences, twisted words) (Miles, Huberman, 2000).

In next stage, interviews' contents were coded according to a prepared set of codes. According to Miles and Huberman (2000), a code is a designation or label for assigning units of meaning to descriptive or inductive information gathered during an investigation. Codes are usually assigned to words, sentences or entire fragments with a specific context (Miles, Huberman, 2000). A starter list of 21 codes had been created. Each code was described by a symbol and name and then defined. Appropriate codes were assigned to sentences or longer fragments of statements. The coding was not limited to naming certain phenomena, but also took into account the characteristics of these phenomena, e.g. conditions of their occurrence, context or interactions (Konecki, 2000). For instance, main code „player experience” (PE) has its subcodes: player experience – time (PE-T), player experience – frequency (PE-F), player experience – intensity (PE-I). Each of the codes had certain segments. As Miles and Huberman (2000) recommend, the codes established at the beginning were modified during the analysis until achieving an efficiency of assigning codes to text fragments (Miles, Huberman, 2000). While assigning codes to fragments of the text, parallely the list of codes was supplemented. Finally, 37 described and defined codes were obtained. During the coding process, brief notes were made at the end of each interview transcript. These notes mainly contained the most important observations and comments, especially focused on what the interview contributes to the research (Miles and Huberman, 2000).

After the contents of interviews were coded, the code cards were created. Each code card was assigned to the characteristics of a different category which constituted a certain set of statements. Each of the statements has been described with specific characteristics (Konecki, 2000). For example category „the quality of virtual products” has attribute such as quality of graphics, visual attractiveness, functionality, realism. Based on the code cards, research results and final conclusion were formulated. Due to the small sample size and the duration of the interview, the use of software was not necessary. In addition, as a method of analysis induction was used. Induction allowed to combine a number of separate facts and details in order to formulate general statements (Rothchild, 2006). The results were confronted with the literature.

4. THE SAMPLE

Most respondents were men and belonged to the age range of 20–30 years of age. They usually had higher education. The sample was diversified in terms of the place of residence and occupation. Among the 20 participants were residents of small and large cities, blue-collar workers (e.g. production worker, mechanic), white-collar workers (e.g. IT specialists, copywriter), and students. The information about the participants is gathered in Table 2.

The author also tried to assess respondents' experience as players. The author considered player experience in years (how long have you play the games?), playing frequency (how often do you play the games?) and playing intensity (how long does a single game last?). This information is presented in Table 3.

One of the players had a temporary break from playing but they have a long experience as a player and broad knowledge so they have been included into the research sample. The vast majority of players has a long experience with games (14 people playing over 5 years), play every day or several times a week (13 players) and half spend more than 4 hours in the game (10 players). Therefore it can be assumed that the recruited group of players has the appropriate experience and knowledge to achieve the goal of the present study.

Respondents indicated different motivations for joining virtual worlds. Respondents most frequently consecutively mentioned: curiosity (caused by TV series, TV program, newspaper or advertisement), interacting with others, interest in the topic of a game, enjoyment from playing, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life, exploring the virtual world, spending free time.

Table 2
Respondents' demographic profiles

Total number of participants		20
Gender	female	8
	male	12
Age	20–30	17
	31–40	0
	41–50	3
Education	vocational	2
	secondary	6
	higher	12
Population size of participant place of residence	up to 20 000	2
	20 001–50 000	3
	50 001–100 000	3
	100 001–200 000	6
	200 001–500 000	2
	more than 500 000	4

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 3
Player experience characteristics

Number of respondents		20
Player experience	≤ 5 years	6
	> 5 years ≤ 10 years	7
	> 10 years	7
Playing frequency	everyday	7
	few times a week	6
	few times a month	3
	less than few times a month	2
	hard to say, from time to time	1
	currently not playing	1
Playing intensity	short – up to 4 hours	9
	long – more than 4 hours	10
	currently not playing	1

Source: Author's elaboration

5. RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE STUDY

During the interviews, respondents indicated a wide range of brands that they met inside the virtual world of computer games. Amongst the brands the following can be listed: clothing products such as Adidas, Reebok and Nike shoes or Diesel trousers, branded cars like Porsche, Lamborghini, BMW, Peugeot, Ford, Volkswagen, Renault, Jeep, branded trucks, e.g. Scania, Volvo, Mercedes, Daf, Man, Iveco. Players mentioned many names of big, well-known companies for example IKEA, Play, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Fanta, Jack Daniels, restaurants, e.g. McDonald's and KFC, petrol station Lotos, Orlen, Shell and BP, payment cards Visa, MasterCard, American Express, shops Aldi and Tesco. Inside the games, respondents encountered many different types of organizations such as universities (Jagiellonian University in Kraków, University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska), Polish political party (SLD), art galleries and museums (Louvre), charity organizations (Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, American Cancer Society). Some real-world elements appear in games under different names, such as in Second Life the Jagiellonian University in Krakow is called Academia Electronica and the charity organization American Cancer Society is named Relay For Life.

The author asked the following research questions. First, what are the popular brand placement methods according to players? The methods indicated in the presented research were identified as based on players' perspectives. Players declared what brand they met and how the brand appeared, not as marketing managers or game developers. The second question is how the methods are described by players? Brand placement methods were defined according to players' experiences. The third, the author analyzed brand placement descriptions to check if there are any regularities in the above-mentioned brand placement methods that allow them to be grouped into specific types? Based on the analysis of conducted interviews, the author proposed five following typologies of product placement in computer games: the place of brand placement, brand availability, the source of brand placement, virtual forms of promotion, the degree of use of the branded product (Appendix 1).

Place of brand placement

Due to the place of brand placement, the methods can be divided into: placement before logging to the game, placement inside the game, placement in separate windows (modes) directly related to the game, and placement on external websites related to the game.

Logging is related to brands placed on the screen before the game starts. Waiting for the game to load, the user has the opportunity to see the logotype or branded product. The Second Life browser is an example of brand placement before logging into a game, its design allows to place ads around the textbox where player enters his username and password. A similar form of brand placement was indicated by an ETS user: "when we log into the game, there are sometimes ads from the World of Trucks website".

There are many examples of brand placement inside the game because it is a relatively popular form of placement. Players can meet the brand directly when moving their avatar inside the virtual environment. A few times SL residents mentioned the case of Play: "There was a club opened, there was supposed to be music, some social center, that Polish society would go there, to advertise buying mobile services", "Generally, Play was supposed to be a meeting place, yes, avatars met, there they sat and talked... it was supposed to be this way. And by the way, it was a nice and purplish place, in Play's own colors".

Other examples also come from Second Life. Respondents saw a machine with beverages such as Pepsi, Coca Cola and Fanta: "After clicking such a machine, a menu appears asking what we would like and you can receive a can for free". Beverages of Pepsi, Coca Cola and Fanta can be found in places where residents spend their free time: "There are also clubs with music (...) cafes and yes, one of them was a vending machine with drinks".

Another method is placing brands inside a game but in separate windows. In this case the plot of the game is separated from the marketing message. Players are logged into the virtual world all the time but in order to see the brand, they must use additional windows or, as respondents called, modes. For example in The Sims: "furniture in The Sims is selected in the buying mode", "shopping takes place in such a way in The Sims that we have a life mode, the one where we play, and a buying mode, where we buy".

A popular place for brand placement is also in external websites related to the game. For example in Second Life: “there is an online shop, something like our Allegro auction portal, Marketplace”. One of the player explain that “there you can browse products that are available for purchase”. The other Second Life resident defines Marketplace as an online market: “Second Life has its own online market, marketplace.secondlife.com”, “at the first page you can see McDonald’s t-shirt”. Players of Euro Truck Simulator 2 also use various types of online websites where branded elements appear: “it is a Steam platform, on which there are various kinds of games, (...) various types of game add-ons, such game accessories can be bought with real money and also sold with real money”.

Brand availability

The second method of brand placement is related to the availability of brands for players. It can be a distinguished paid brand appearance in a game and a free brand appearance. Paid placement takes place when a player needs to pay to get a certain brand to the game. Payment can be made in both real or fictitious money. Free placements may require certain in-game achievements from the user, or may take place without any requirements.

A few times, respondents described paid branded add-ons created for The Sims. One of the most popular was the addition with H&M: “especially in the second part, we have all add-ons, they were accessories (...) it was fashion from H&M”, “and there were clothes that could also be found in H&M”, “You could also create your own H&M store in the game”, “with all the accessories and all means that came to create this store, or hangers with clothes, carrying the H&M logo, some such white and red colors characteristic for the brand, yes, they are H&M colors. It was also in... I don’t know, covering walls in such colors, etc. That the store really looked like H&M”. A similar example represented the IKEA brand that appears inside The Sims: “„with the add-on, you could open your own IKEA store and sell IKEA furniture there”, “there was furniture, wall coverings and it really was furniture just like in IKEA, that they had just the same names as in IKEA, there were the most iconic armchairs, the most iconic IKEA sofas, some small tables, and what’s interesting, in the game there was the cheapest furniture which could have been suggested that is IKEA... so affordable”. It happens that obtaining branded products involves the need for certain achievements in the game, e.g.: “and this furniture was bought for money. But if you want to get money you need to send your sim to work”.

Source of brand placement

The third typology of brand placement methods in virtual worlds takes into consideration their source. Brands can appear in the game because of the game producer, organizations (e.g. enterprises), and players.

Brands may appear in the game at the initiative of the game developer. An example: brands of trucks driven by players in the ETS2: “if we are talking about the official game without any add-ons, then we have truck brands like Scania, Volvo, Mercedes, Daf”, “the trucks, you can move them, you can drive them, they are branded”. Besides the brands available in the basic version of the game, there are also official add-ons: “moreover, there are add-ons that allow you to use trailers from real companies”, “there are two companies at the moment, Schwarzmuller and Krone”, “there is also a tire Michelin license”, “licenses are obtained from real producers in order to use the names and logos in the game”.

Brands may appear in the game also at the initiative of organizations (brands). In this case, it is not the game producer who is trying to obtain a license from the organization that owns the brand. The organization takes actions aimed at placing its products or logo inside the game. This is how Peugeot appeared in the SL: “And when it comes to Peugeot, Peugeot has made an island, built, an advertising island, where only Peugeots were”, “You could see the cars virtually. There were models that they normally offer in the real world”. Then a SL player described what the placement looks like: “That was a car track on the whole island made, around this island. You could drive such a car”, “Peugeot showed up, showed his models, photos... sports, racing, in this way they advertised”.

Very often, brands appear in virtual worlds because of involvement of users: “Generally in the game as such there are only restaurants or buildings with fictitious names, however, modifications released by game fans add real names” (ETS2). During the interviews, the author identified an interesting trend among players, i.e. modifying the content of the game. Modifying the game itself is nothing new, but in

this case the purpose of modification is to introduce brands to the virtual world. According to Wallace (2014) modifying a game or game modding in other words, is the process of changing, adding or removing a game code that changes the way the game is played. The process includes many different actions, such as changing the graphic design (so-called “reskinning”) or creating new characters and objects. It happens in extreme cases that the creator removes almost all the original content of the game and replaces it with a completely new one, resulting in a practically different game. The action is known as “total conversion modding” (Wallace, 2014). Whereas Poor (2014) defines computer game modding as an act of game change, usually done through programming and using tools that are not part of the game. It does not take place on the initiative of the game’s producer, but its users and fans. It happens that some game developers support a modding community, for example by providing them with discussion forums (Poor, 2014).

Respondents treated game modding as a way to bring real brands to the virtual environment. An example represents a restaurants in ETS2: “Because the studio cannot use the restaurant’s logotype, players create modifications and they are unofficial extensions of the game”. Users are able to list many brands placed in the way, e.g. petrol station “Orlen, Shell, BP, what else... Lotos too, yes, Lotos is also there”, “and also DHL, DHL is yellow perhaps, yellow and red”, “As part of the modification, for example, I saw McDonalds restaurants, I saw KFC”.

Many statements suggest that users are not sure about the legality of such add-ons: “they are partially doing it illegally, even though it is illegal, the guys are doing a good job”, “Usually, people do it so that they are able to write to real companies that are, for example, in Poland, yes, the companies allow something like that and there are people who can modify various types of trucks or the way that the tractor looks like, the same as in real life” (ETS2). Users who have appropriate skills and create their own add-ons usually share them with other players (“there is a huge community where people do such things, share, and others download and test”, “such a workshop where you can throw your own things, there are also unofficial forums where there is plenty of it”).

Inside the games, there can be found a wide range of brands that replicate real life brands. For example in Second Life: “there are many products of this type here, everything that looks very similar, but Armani is not Armani. There are a lot of such products, clothes or other accessories that really resemble those real accessories”, “Just like in the real world, there are some counterfeit Adidas products” (SL). Euro Truck Simulator 2 users characteristic cars with imitative brands appearing in the game: “Now a new mod has been released for multiplayer, Skoda Fabia, only that they don’t call it Skoda Fabia, but a similar name and also looks similar, and the steering wheel is similar”, “In the single-player game, there is traffic of ordinary cars”, “and when it comes to ordinary cars there, it can be seen that it is Skoda, Volkswagen, because the models are really well-made, but unfortunately they did not get a license so the stamps are covered”, “ by the contour, so to speak, by the grill, OR by the lamps, yes, it’s to keep them unknown. Skoda, Audi, Volkswagen too, what else was there, all in all, the three most often appear”.

The statements refer to the appearance of the Skoda brand in single-player and multiplayer games, which suggests that one placement is the result of the work of an individual creator (player), and the second placement is available in the official version of the game. It can be suspected that individual users show the need to have real brands inside the game and create products similar to branded products. Game producers are aware of the need and therefore place products similar to those branded from the real world inside the games.

Placing fictitious brands can possibly be an alternative when a player is unsure about the legality of downloading or creating mods with real life brands. A game producer may use fictitious brands when they are unable to obtain a license to use particular brands inside the game.

Virtual forms of promotion

Brand placement methods can be divided according to virtual forms of promotion, i.e. forms of promotion from the real world that have been embedded in virtual reality. It can be listed as traditional forms of promotion, such as advertising, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion and non-standard promotional activities such as word-of-mouth marketing.

The first virtual form of promotion, advertising, is very widely used inside computer games. In several interviews with SL users, radio was mentioned as an advertising medium, e.g. “On the islands,

when you play the radio, there are commercials”, “Yes, in this place the radio does exist. Someone enters Second Life as an avatar and hosts broadcasts at the same time”.

In virtual worlds, respondents frequently encountered advertising on billboards and banners. Some users are able to indicate a lot of advertisements they have seen on billboards, others only one or two. It partly depends on the version of the game or downloaded add-ons. One of the players of ETS2 describes it: “when it comes to some real ads, (...) billboards usually appear as if you download an add-on, but only for a single player game”, “Good additions are maps of Poland, there are even advertisements of Biedronka, Lidl, there is quite a lot of it there”. Billboards are also popular in SL: “When it comes to advertising inside Second Life, there are plenty of them. You can meet them at every step. Ads of places, products”, “They look like billboards, just like the graphic with shoes only located somewhere in the world of Second Life”. In SL banners work a little differently: “there are such meeting places, they can be clubs for example, and they rent advertising space. They rent, someone pays them and such a banner hangs somewhere and you can just see it”. In SL banners function as an element used for commercial purposes.

An interesting form of promotion is advertising placed on trucks in ETS2: “on trailers, for example, there are a lot of real brands, there is Lidl, Biedronka, there is also CCC”, “you can even download Jacek Daniels, because there is really a lot of it”.

Activities in the field of public relations include, among others, organizing various types of virtual events, meetings, conferences, or fairs. The issue appeared in the context of charity campaigns conducted in the virtual world of SL. SL users indicated charity organization Relay for Life, in real life named American Cancer Society (“A few years ago, a charity event, playing for the disabled people for 3 days and 3 nights without a break (...) fundraising for people with cancer”, “Those, the so-called Relays For Life, take place cyclically”). On the official website of the organization there can be find information about the virtual event called “Making Strides Against Breast Cancer”, it took place in 2014 in SL (www.cancer.org/involved/volunteer/society-second-life.html, retrieved 01.03.2019).

The polish example concerns concerts of The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (WOŚP). Through SL money was collected in a similar way as in real life: “Amongst charity events WOŚP was certainly happening. There were also fundraisers, I do not know how exactly it was, who did it, and who transferred the money after that, but I know that WOŚP was there. (...) It seems to me that everyone, really everyone who went somewhere there, left some small change at least”, “It was in Krakow that, as I said, all the concerts were organized”.

Amongst public relation activities virtual places created by organizations for the virtual community for spending free time and offering many forms of entertainment can also be mentioned. An example is the aforementioned Play island in the SL virtual world.

Direct marketing most often takes the form of selling virtual products in virtual stores. According to respondents, direct selling is quite developed especially in SL. Virtual stores are set up by both ordinary users (players) and representatives of companies (“Let’s say there’s an AB store and it just opens with its logo. The logo AB is placed in the same way as, for example, a Black Red White store in Poland, and here is the AB store” SL). In such virtual stores, sales are carried out in a similar way as in the real world. A potential customer enters the store and looks at the products that interest them. A significant difference is in the absence of a person who is a seller in a virtual store. Because the definition of personal selling is based on the distribution of goods and services through direct contact between the seller and the buyer (Peterson, Wotruba, 1996), the lack of personal contact between the seller and the customer inside the virtual world caused the classification of the form of promotion as direct marketing and not personal selling. Moreover, some authors’ definitions of personal selling assumed that the sales process take part outside the retail outlet, in this case, outside the company virtual store (Peterson, Wotruba, 1996). There are many examples of virtual stores, from ordinary boutiques with a small area, selling for instance clothing for avatars (“There are plenty of shops in Second Life, including clothing stores”), to very extensive shops, covering the area of entire islands. An interesting example is the Sony Ericson store, where the company invested in the purchase of an entire island in SL: “Sony Ericson had its island made, there were virtual models of their phones on display. There was nothing you could do there, just the phones were there, and looked like in real life”, “You could buy the phones with virtual currency, but sometimes you could get them for free from the company”.

Also as part of direct marketing, organizations allow players to use virtual equivalents of their real-world products. Some of the most popular virtual products are clothing and accessories that allow

players to modify the appearance of an avatar, e.g. the Diesel collection in The Sims (“Yes, you could wear Diesel pants and have them all the time”) or Katy Perry line (“the whole series of accessories signed Katy Perry (...) characteristic things like her, such as clothes for The Sims, just like she wears on stage, that for example she had such a sweet fairy-tale, sweet fairy-tale outfit, today, for example, some cupcake on the head or some... cherry dress”).

The aforementioned personal selling can be classified as activities of an organization during which there is mutual communication between the seller and the customer (Oladepo, Abimbola, 2015), and the seller persuades and helps the customer to make a purchase decision (Todorova, 2015). Among the examples mentioned by the players, personal selling is relatively scarce. It can be consider an example of an organization mentioned by an SL user, namely the American Cancer Society (Relay for Life). During charity events, virtual volunteers encouraged players to get involved in the action (www.secondlife.com/destination/american-cancer-society, retrieved 02.07.2019).

Inside virtual worlds, sales promotion has also been used. Virtual products were offered to users at attractive prices (or even for free) within a specified, short-term perspective. Adidas shoes were available in SL in a special offer during fixed period of time: “for example, they would give information to the group, that in an hour, those shoes will be for 5 Lindens, or even they were giving the shoes for free, only for one hour. Those who knew benefited from it.”

The indicated example is also related to another virtual form of brand promotion, i.e. word-of-mouth marketing. Many times, social groups formed in virtual worlds enabled the dissemination of commercial information by organizations (“but to know about them, about promotions, you have to belong to communities, you have to know what notifications they send”). Participants of the communities share news about products and promotions with each other. There is also some kind of a newsletter: “someone... who creates, and promotes new products in Second Life, and opened a virtual store, invites people to a newsletter and spreads information about the store”.

In addition to the word-of-mouth marketing, another non-standard form of promotion appeared, namely ambient advertising. Users of ETS2 described various gadgets appearing inside the game marked with different logos, e.g. “We have also a cup with a logotype of the studio which released the game. You can buy the cup in real, in their shop on the game producer’s website”. This cup is inside the truck that the player is driving.

In order to assign appropriate methods of brand placement to particular forms of promotion, the author used definitions of forms of promotion, in particular Kotler’s classification (1994) and definitions of non-standard forms of promotion. Some virtual forms of promotion may cause some doubts, because the application of the definition in the computer game environment is quite difficult, and the boundaries between various forms are blurred.

Degree of use of a branded product

The fifth division of the brand placement method considers the way the brand is used by the player in the virtual world. Full (free) use of the branded product and limited use of the branded product can be distinguished in the game.

Full or free use of the product takes place when the player can use the product embedded in the game in the way they want, providing that the technical capabilities of the game allow it. Respondents are able to indicate many examples of the brand placement type. For example in SL they saw: “Converse, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, mostly sports, Lamborghini, Porsche etc. popular brads”. The listed products could be used for their intended purpose, in the same way as in the real world: “yes, clothes are mainly for dressing”, “cars were driven and could be raced”. Another example is the names of real radio stations: “radios in clubs played, the popular ones, the same as in real life... Radio Zet, RMF FN etc.” A very good example is the appearance of the Jagiellonian University in SL. Through their avatars, users can participate in virtual exercises and lectures in the same way as in the real world (“there we meet in this environment, the lecturer gives a lecture, or some exercises also take place”). In addition, to participate in the classes, users must be students of the Jagiellonian University. Inside the ETS2 game, an example of the full use of a branded product are primarily the trucks that the player drives: “Yes, trucks of seven brands are available in the game (...) All of them are European brands. They are successively Volvo, Scania, Das, Man, Mercedes, Iveco and Reno”, “Only the trucks, you can move them, you can drive them, they are, they are branded”. Among the brands located in The Sims, an example is the aforementioned

Katy Perry series of accessories (“e.g. clothes for Sims like she wears on stage”). The accessories included not only clothing but also furniture that could also be used: “you could buy one for your home, sit in it, on the furniture”, “if, for example, you bought a wardrobe, it served as a wardrobe, so when you go to the wardrobe, the sim could change clothes or simply see what clothes they have”.

A limited way of using branded products occurs when the brand being placed is a certain element of the environment, e.g. billboards or banners, and the player can use them to a small extent. Players can benefit from the elements, e.g. financially (e.g. by renting advertising space on his property), but they are unable to use them in their existence. An example is one of the closets available as part of one of the expansions for The Sims. It was only an element of home decor, it functioned as a background, and the user could not use it, for example, to store clothes (“and that closet was just a closet and... a useless closet”).

The limited use refers also to all brands appearing inside the game on banners, billboards or as a static element of the background inside the game, for instance The Palace of Culture, which can be seen in the background driving a truck through Warsaw in ETS2.

During interviews, players admitted that they want to raise the realism of the game. For example in Euro Truck Simulator 2: “Another thing are the modifications of the game, which strongly expand the game. They allow the game to be more complete and more real”, “And the most attractive thing for people is more and more realism for entertainment and more and more things that are used by real drivers, such as the axle lift in the truck, the physics of the whole vehicle. Recently, the functionality of buying your own trailers has been added”. In order to make the game more realistic players need branded products. It can be observed e.g. in The Sims (“in the second part of the game there was a nice reference to real life, especially since we could go to IKEA and buy a sofa, the same as in The Sims and it was so funny”) and Second Life (“people are copying, what they are in the real world, they are just copying, yes. Because they want to give some reality, reality in the world, that it would be the most real”, “it’s nice to have something branded, and in Second Life the same, it was great to have something branded”).

6. DISCUSSION

Research results and available literature

The analysis of the material collected during the interviews enabled to identify numerous methods of product placement in computer games, which were then sorted according to common features. As a result, five typologies of brand placement were obtained.

The first one divided the methods of product placement to: placement before logging to the game, placement inside the game, placement in separate windows (modes) directly related to the game, placement on external websites related to the game. The most popular method of brand placement in the current literature is brand placement within the virtual world of a computer game, usually within the use of a virtual branded product. A branded product is part of the game, such as avatar accessories, pieces of equipment or tools. The consumer has the opportunity to try the product inside the game before making a purchase in real life (Nelson, 2002). Brand placement during game loading or immediately after logging in but before the start of the game was mentioned by the respondents, however, no characteristics of the type of placement were found in the literature. Similarly, in the case of placing a brand in separate windows, in the game menu, where the player can search for additional options during the game. During interviews, respondents indicated examples such as the possibility of “downloading” company accessories or gadgets during the game (e.g. clothes from the Katy Perry series, IKEA furniture). In terms of placement on websites related to the game, it should be considered whether the method meets the requirement of the product placement definition. According to the definition, product placement is a paid inclusion of a branded product or brand identifier in the action of a film, program or other medium (Gangadharbatla, Bradley, Wise, 2013). In this case, the brand is definitely not incorporated into the content of the game. Even though placement on game-related websites is not consistent with definition of product placement, the author decides to draw attention to the form of advertising because it can strengthen brand placement within the virtual gaming environment. Respondents mentioned examples of brands located inside the virtual world, the game producer also promoted them on the Internet websites. In the available literature, the author found only one mention about this form of advertising. Çeltek (2010) named it as “on-site advertising”, and defined

as paid placement of advertising banners on websites of particular games and on portals related to the gaming industry (Çeltek, 2010).

The second method of brand placement is related to the availability of brands for players. It can be listed here as paid placement or free placement. Paid placement takes place when a player needs to pay to get a certain brand to the game. Payment can be made in both real or fictitious money. Free placements may require certain in-game achievements from the user, or may take place without any requirements. Respondents admitted that they paid for the appearance of the brand by buying official add-ons that included branded game elements (e.g. car equipment, avatar accessories). Others bought branded products in-game with virtual or real money. Majority of current literature focused on buying virtual products inside the game. It can be caused by meaningful sales volumes. An example is the virtual world of Second Life, popular among players and scientists. Yet in December 2006, with 1.77 million users, the value of purchases of virtual products reached approximately \$656,000 per day in real currency. In January 2007, spending reached \$805,096 per day with 2.67 million users (Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, Li, 2008). Scientists have conducted numerous studies, to a large extent focused on individual motives for making purchase inside computer games, e.g. Guo, Barnes, (2009), Jin, Sun, Wang, Zhang (2017). Nevertheless, interviews conducted by Hansen (2013) amongst users of There.com virtual world showed that some brands players can gain after they accomplish a particular task. Some respondents admitted that they obtain branded products after participating in virtual events organized by a brand. The others sent their avatars to work in virtual team which promote the brand. They earn virtual money to buy branded products (Hansen, 2013).

The third typology of brand placement methods in virtual worlds takes into consideration their source. Brands can appear in the game because of the game producer, organizations (e.g. enterprises) and players. A game producer who wants to use branded elements in his game pays the organization (brand owner) for the possibility. It is difficult to find publications on the placement method in the literature. Most of the scientific publications are devoted to placement, for which the organization (brand owner) pays the game producer. The type of placement is often called "sponsorship". Yet in 2001, Nelson distinguished sponsorship from other placement methods. Next to the sponsorship, Nelson noted that players who want to customize the game to their needs, introduce some brands into the game (Nelson, 2002). For instance, in Nascar Racing 3, players are able to customize their racing cars by "repainting" them in any pattern containing a logotype and colors of freely chosen brands (Nelson, 2005). More recently, Siemens, Smith and Fisher (2015) also paid attention to the brand placement method where players have possibility to control the appearance of the brand in the game. They also considered brands available at the start of the game. The approach applies to introducing brands into the game by its users, but only from the set of brands that are available in the game. Similar examples were also indicated by the participants of the in-depth interviews. Euro Truck Simulator 2 users had the opportunity to choose the brand of the truck they were driving in the game. It was a collection of several brands available before the start of the game. During the interviews, it was also possible to identify an interesting trend among players, i.e. introducing brands to the game by modifying its content. The author did not find any publications in the field in the available literature.

Brand placement methods can be divided according to virtual forms of promotion, i.e. forms of promotion from the real world that have been embedded in virtual reality. Traditional forms of promotion can be listed, such as advertising public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion, and non-standard promotional activities such as word-of-mouth marketing. After 2002, advertisements were one of the most popular methods of brand placement in computer games, usually on virtual billboards. Most often billboards appeared in racing games or games took place in a city landscape visible (Nelson, 2002). A few years later Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) characterized a rich set of virtual forms of promotion: in the field of direct marketing, setting up virtual company stores inside the game, virtual advertising media (e.g. radio), purchase of virtual advertising space, mainly on billboards, sponsorship related to supporting virtual events inside the game. As Sharma, Qiang, Wenjun and Qi (2013) noticed, virtual communities of players offer favorable conditions for conducting activities in the field of word-of-mouth marketing. Virtual world enables gathering information among virtual friends and the exchange of the information as well as ideas, comments, and opinions. The advantage of using informal communication within the games is the fast circulation of the promotional message on a global scale and relatively low costs (Sharma, Qiang, Wenjun, Qi, 2013). The typology according to virtual forms of promotion, characterized on the basis of the conducted interviews, is consistent with

the current literature. However, available publications describe the typology of brand placement in fragments, focusing on selected virtual forms of promotion.

The fifth division of brand placement methods considers the way the brand is used by the player in the virtual world. Full (free) use of the branded product and limited use of the branded product can be distinguished in the game. The typology is common in the literature. However, the nomenclature used by scientists is varied. According to Kuhn and Pope (2010), there are use-simulated placements, the player is engaged in branded products by using them. An alternative method (peripheral placement) is to place brands in the background as passive props. Most often, the brand logotype is part of the game landscape (Kuhn, Pope, 2010).

Real life brands and game realism

During interviews, the issue of game realism has been raised. Many users believe that brands appear in games to provide elements from the real world. Repeatedly respondents emphasized that virtual branded items reflected the characteristics of the same items or objects from the real world. The influence of brand placement on the sense of realism has already appeared in previous studies. According to the results of qualitative research conducted by Hansen (2013), branded products inside a game are a bridge between the virtual and real world. Respondents were able to describe examples of branded products that are replicas of real-life products (Hansen, 2013). Similarly Molesworth (2006) pointed out that many brands in games are placed in a way similar to what we can observe in real life. Advertisers try to show certain product features to make them look natural and after some period of time when consumers recall a given feature they may not be aware whether they remember it from real or virtual world (Molesworth, 2006).

Contribution to theory and practice

The present paper contributes to the theory of marketing communication in computer games. Knowledge about the forms of brand placement, as was fragmentarily described in the available publications, has been systematized. Based on 20 in-depth interviews, the author identified the current method of product placement in computer games and offered a typology. Each method was described and widely explained. The presented study also contributes to practice. Managers who consider brand promotion in computer games can choose an appropriate method from proposed typology. They can get inspired and design their own unique campaigns. Practitioners should also take into consideration characteristic features of each method, for example from the point of view of exposure time, repeatability of brand appearance or possibility to avoid a brand. Marketers are also given an outlook how players see particular placement strategies. They are able to match the placement method and the type of product. For managers who already use computer games in their marketing communication can broaden their knowledge about other solutions for their brands. From the perspective of game developers, understanding brand placement methods can help shape an offer for companies which want to place their brands inside a game.

Limitations

Similarly to most researches, the presented study has also some limitations. At first, there are only three computer games chosen for the study. As the number of interviews was limited to 20, including more games probably will cause a situation in which the games would not have been well characterized. The author considered gathering knowledge, as much as possible, about the methods used in each of the games. Secondly, the chosen games have been present for a few years on the market before the research. The author wants to obtain experience from players who spend in particular game enough time to describe the brands featured in virtual world in details. Unfortunately, it causes that the included games are little old. It is worth to expand the research with newer games. Thirdly, interviews, as other qualitative studies, could be conducted with limited number of respondents. Probably quantitative studies could confirm the obtained results. Quantitative studies, e.g. questionnaire researches could also determine popularity of the methods applied by companies or indicate which methods are best remembered by players.

Future research

The presented research allowed to determine the current method of product placement in computer games. Further work should determine which methods of brand placement to use and how they could affect brand response. In terms of psychological response it is worth to pay attention to the impact of particular methods on brand recall and brand recognition. Recall and recognition are two measures most commonly focusing attention on scholars in terms of in-game advertising effectiveness (Hwang, Ballouli, So, Heere 2017). When the buyer thinks about a certain product category, the natural consequence is to recall the brand related to the category (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2006). In research, brand recall was broadly assessed, mainly by asking participants to list all the brand names that appeared in the game (Lee, Faber, 2007). When it comes to brand recognition, the buyer meets the brand name and tries to assign it to a specific product category. Brands that consumers can link to a product category are more likely to succeed in the market (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2006). Some previous research (e.g. Waiguny, Nelson, Terlutter, 2010) proved that product placement in computer games can exert influence on customers' beliefs and thoughts about a brand. An interesting issue is how the method of placement shapes the image of a brand in customers' eyes. It is also important to know how each product placement method influences a brand attitude. Brand attitudes convey information about what the consumer thinks and feels about the brand, about the intentions to act as a result of thoughts and feelings (Kruger, Boshoff, 2015). Future research should also determine the effects of brand placement methods on behavioral response, especially purchasing a branded product (or service) and the recommendation of branded product (or service) to other consumers.

Brands and game modding

A few respondents describe interesting issues regarding introducing brands into a game environment by players by the so-called game modding. A player becomes the creator of informal additions to games called "mods" (Postigo, 2007). Game modding is a process of changing the content of a computer game by its users, including the introduction of new artifacts (e.g. buildings, tools), characters (e.g. enemies), game areas (e.g. levels, maps) or items, textures, rulesets into a game. Players engage in game modding but not for financial reasons (Moshirnia, 2007). Mod creators constitute a certain community, in which they support each other, share the effects of their work and often cooperate on creating a complicated add-on (Poor, 2014). The creators share the effects of their work with other players via various websites, such as the Steam platform, owned by Valve Corporation (Lin, Bezemer, Zou, Hassan, 2019). Steam has a community in 237 countries and 21 languages (Brunt, King, King, 2020). In-depth interview showed that when players put a brand into a game through game modding they have a sense of control of brand appearance in the game. In 2015, Siemens, Smith and Fisher paid attention to a brand placement strategy in which players have the possibility to control the appearance of a brand in a game. They proved that a high degree of player control may result in a greater return on investment in product placement than in the case of passive placement. In addition, the ability to choose a brand makes the brand important in the plot of the action (Siemens, Smith, Fisher, 2015). "Active control of brand placement" allows users to choose a brand from the brand set provided by game producers. The player's choice is not unlimited like in the case of game modding. It could be concluded that branded mods are an important phenomenon from the marketing perspective. An analysis of scientific publications allows to find some research regarding game modding and presumption, game modding and communities, game modding and value co-creation. The author did not identify the researched brands in game mods or game modding from the point of view of marketing communication. Perhaps future research will allow to fill the identified research gaps.

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APPENDIX 1

Examples of brand placement types

Typology	Types of brand placement	Examples of players explanations
Place of brand placement	placement before logging to the game	"when we log into the game, there are sometimes ads from the World of Trucks website"
	placement inside the game	"there was a club opened, there was supposed to be the music, a social center that Polish society would go to, to advertise buying mobile services"
	placement in separate windows (modes) directly related to the game	"furniture in The Sims is selected in a buying mode"
	and placement on external websites related to the game	"there is an online shop, something like our Allegro auction portal, Marketplace"
Brand availability	paid brand appearance in game	"in this game there was the cheapest furniture which could have been suggested that IKEA... is so affordable" (...) "and this furniture was bought for money".
	free brand appearance	
	require certain in-game achievements from the user	"and this furniture was bought for money. But if you want to get money you need to send your sim to work".
	take place without any requirements	"Sony Ericson had its island made, there were virtual models of the phones on display. There was nothing you could do there, just the phones were there, and looked like in real life" (...) "You could buy the phones with virtual currency, but sometimes you could get them for free from the company"
Source of brand placement	the game producer	"if we are talking about the official game without any add-ons, then we have truck brands like Scania, Volvo, Mercedes, Daf"
	organizations (e.g. enterprises)	"and when it comes to Peugeot, Peugeot has made an island, built, an advertising island, where only Peugeots were"
	players	"because the studio cannot use the restaurant's logotype, players create modifications and they are unofficial extensions of the game" (...) "as part of the modification, for example, I saw McDonalds restaurants, I saw KFC".

Typology	Types of brand placement	Examples of players explanations
Virtual forms of promotion	Advertising	"on the islands, when you play the radio, there are commercials", "when it comes to some real ads (...) the billboards usually appear as if you download an add-on, but only for the single player game"
	Public relations	"amongst charity events WOŚP was certainly happening"
	Direct marketing	"let's say there's an AB store and it just opens with its logo. The logo AB is placed in the same way as, for example, a Black Red White store in Poland, and here is the AB store"
	Personal selling	"There are plenty of shops in Second Life, including clothing stores" (...) "Sony Ericson had its island made, there were virtual models of the phones on display"
	Sales promotion	"for example, they would give information to the group, that in an hour, those shoes will be for 5 Lindens, or even they were giving the shoes for free, only for one hour. The people who knew benefited from it."
	Word-of-mouth marketing	"but to know about them, about promotions, you have to belong to communities, you have to know what notifications they send"
Degree of use of the branded product	full (free) use of the branded product	"Converse, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, mostly sports, Lamborghini, Porsche etc. popular brads" (...) "yes, clothes are mainly for dressing" (...) "cars were driven and could be raced"
	limited use of the branded product in the game	"and that closet was just a closet and... a useless closet"