

Brand introduction into virtual worlds of computer game as a form of customer engagement

The prevalence of Internet and social media like blogs or social networking sites allow marketers to involve customers in content generation and value creation in order to better meeting their needs. Anybody who have internet access can join the group of media creators and play a role in media production such as game modification, described by its practitioners as “game modding”. Game modding or modifying is a process of changing, adding or removing game code that changes the way the game is played. This process includes many different actions, such as changing the graphic layout or creating new characters and objects. It does not take place on the initiative of the game producer, only its users and fans. Some companies support modders by providing them toolkits and discussion forums. Using these tools players can modify existing products to fit their individual needs.

Present project is aimed to investigate creating and using branded computer game elements as a customer engagement behavior. From 2018 August 21 to 2018 December 5, the author carried out 20 the in-depth interviews oriented on types of brand placement in computer games when the issue of modifying the game content by players has emerged. The results show that respondents engage in producing diversified game elements stamped with brand logotypes. The engagement behaviors takes various forms from simple placing branded product that can be used in games (for example clothes or accessories for avatars) to creating whole extensive add-ons. As an example it can be listed the McDonalds and KFC restaurants appearing inside the Euro Truck Simulator 2: *„Generally in the game as such there are only restaurants or buildings of type with fictitious names, however, modifications released by game fans add real names”, “Orlen, Shell, BP, what else is there... Lotos too, yes, Lotos is either”*. Individual creators often belong to certain communities that support each other in different ways.

Numerous researchers gave proofs that brand placed in computer games exert influence on consumers and their brand attitude or brand beliefs. Nowadays, brand introduction into game environment is not yet only possible by action of companies or game developers and can be also supported by players. Consequently, the primary objectives of present project are:

- 1) Recognition of individual motives of players’ engagement in brand introduction into virtual worlds of computer games through game modding.
- 2) Determination of the factors that impact on propensity to feature brand inside the game environment (factors directly related to the players and external factors).

Initial literature review suggests that there is a limited knowledge about value creation related to brands created by game fans (and placed into virtual worlds) as a result of so called “game modding” and players’ motives to engage in this kind of activities. Present project has a chance to fill in the outlined research gap.

Research will take place in several stages. The background of the research will constitute systematic literature review based on analysis of continuous publications, especially international scientific article. In second stage, qualitative research will be conducted. In this stage, the qualitative narrative research analysis will be employed. Information’s will be obtained from comments posted on online forums. It will be chosen a topics related to game modding, especially dedicated for games: Euro Truck Simulator, American Truck Simulator and Second Life. The aim of the analysis is to explore how users chose particular branded modes and what factors they take into account. The analysis will involve players who “produce” game mods as well as players who only use mods made by the others. Secondly, 20 in-depth interviews with adult players will be applied. Participants will be invited through online forums, platforms associated with modding communities. The analysis will also involve players who “produce” game mods as well as players who only use mods made by the others. Participants will be invited through online forums, platforms associated with communities of “mods” creators and social groups created on Facebook by game's fans. Participants will be asked about their modding experiences. In the third stage, quantitative research with use of online questionnaire was planned (at least 300 correctly filled questionnaire). The questionnaires will be collected through platforms gathered modding communities such as Steam, fan pages on Facebook related to particular games and online forums. The analysis will involve players who “produce” game mods as well as players who only use mods made by the others. Questions will be created based on qualitative research and will be related to players’ modding experience, their initial motives and factors that influence on modding behaviors. Survey data will be analyzed and interpreted in relation to research hypothesis. In Addition, induction (literature review and in-depth interviews) and deduction (theory testing) will be employed in separate parts of a project.

The result of present project will give an outlook on individual players’ motives to engage in brand introduction in computer game throughout game modding and what factors can influence players’ propensity to engage in this actions.