

Interactive Graphic Novels: A Hybrid Advertising Technique

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Abstract

As web-based technologies continue to advance, marketers and advertisers are pairing up traditional advertising with new web-based techniques to create innovative ways to communicate messages. This study analyzed Interactive Graphic Novels (IGNs)-- animated, graphically illustrated or hybrid real life animation stories typically in video game format in which users are given some level of interaction with events or control over the outcome of a story. This study sought to find out if IGNs were an effective tactic for marketers and advertisers to use today. This study found that IGNs are an effective tactic for advertising and marketing professionals with the means to create them. If anything, IGNs' ability to appeal to multiple human senses makes these productions a powerful tool to communicate messages. IGNs are also able to harness the power of persuading through storytelling. At the present time, IGNs are a rather new concept, so online users have repeatedly favored them.

I. Introduction

Comics and graphic novels have a rich history in American culture for their ability to entertain, inform, and even educate a reader. From an information design perspective, comics have the ability to fuse graphical and informational content in a unique way that traditional works of literature do not. From an advertising perspective, comics and graphic novels offer artists and information designers a unique way to present accumulated content and information to create meaning for a specified audience. Together, they serve as a powerful tools to communicate messages.

As web technologies advance, developers, artists, and marketing professionals are experimenting with new ways to engage target audiences and advertise products. Interactive Graphic Novels (IGNs) act as a means of storytelling where developers and designers can use animation, vivid graphics, rich multimedia, and other web-based features to communicate information to online users. Advertising professionals are using these products to create visually appealing stories that aim to grab online attention and better promote brands, products, and ideas. IGNs are new, visually stimulating, and has become quite popular in the design and advertising community. For this reason, marketers and advertisers would be interested in further research regarding IGNs and their ability to communicate direct, as well as subliminal messages to those who interact with them.

Keywords: IGNs, web-based techniques, interactivity, advertising, rich-media

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II. Literature Review

Interactive Media and Advertising

As web technologies continue to evolve, interactive media, and advertising have begun to build a strong relationship. Interactive media allows advertisers to establish a two-way interaction with an audience by using new web-based formats and techniques to enhance persuasive appeal and user engagement (Sundar and Kim, 2005). Weber and Rall (2012) define interactivity as “a dialogue between the user and the artifact, and the artifact can be viewed as a partner who invites the user to communicate and act.” Interactive advertising goes beyond simple animated banners and click-through techniques that were once considered a new and innovative way to push advertising content. By using social media, branded polls and games, and other methods to engage target audiences in a continuous dialogue, ads can now send stronger messages that keep user’s attention for longer durations and motivate them to share content with others.

Through a process called *hybridization*, advertisers have the ability to pair up traditional advertising techniques with new, interactive techniques to uniquely communicate information and market products. An example of hybridization include advergames, which are interactive games played online that attempt to instill brand messages in users (King, 2012).

Studies on interactive websites suggest that users show increased feelings of telepresence, higher interest, and a more positive attitude overall toward the site (Coyle and Thorson, 2001). Early studies indicate that interactivity in web advertisements increases the persuasive function of online ads as well (Sundar et al., 1997). Fogg (2003) adds that increased interactivity positively correlates with a user’s opinion of site credibility.

Interactive media has also been found to increase arousal in users. Heo and Sundar (2000) found that as levels of arousal increased, so did cognitive performance. Increased cognitive performance leads to better information processing and retention. In addition, researchers have found that increased interactivity led to both more recall and recognition of information associated with the content directly affected by interactive features (Sundar and Kalyanaraman, 2004). Advertisers have been using sex appeal, shock-appeal, and other controversial methods to evoke emotional responses in people for years. Recent research proves that interactive media can be an effective method to evoke an emotional response in a less controversial way.

Comics and Information Design

Comics and graphic novels have the ability to easily tell stories where single images and static graphics do not. Both comics and information design can create meaning from fragments of content by organizing selected pieces of content in a sequential way. Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984) highlights the value of persuading through narration. Figueiredo (2011) states, “Traditional comics rely on readers to fill in the gaps between the panels, compelling the reader to construct the part of the story not shown, thus enhancing engagement and cognitive function.” Figueiredo (2011) goes on to say, “If a narrative is engaging, truthful, and congruent with an audience’s experiences, then it can convince them of good reason to engage in a particular action or belief.” This is a fundamental concept of advertising.

McCloud (2006) states that comics and graphic novels give readers a rare chance to “listen with their eyes.” This is accomplished by including speech balloons that link images and text simultaneously. This conveys the impression of sound in a textual medium. Eisner (1985) points out that since this process is repeated over and over by a reader, it simulates sound effects in the brain and gives off the impression that the audience has become an active participant in the comic. By becoming a participant in the framework of where the content exists, audiences become compelled to finish the story and are more likely to further engage with the content at the maximum level (Brown and Duguid, 2000).

David Carrier (2001) writes, “Reading comic narratives is to look into the minds of fictional characters as if their inner worlds had become transparent.” McCloud (1994) stresses that since “we see ourselves in everything, we assign identities and emotions where none exist. And we make the world over in our image.”

How an audience relates to the fictional characters and the fictional environments seen in the comic form determines how the audience enters into the narrative and how it engages with the information.

Rich-Media

Rich-media allows developers to further immerse users in online content. Rich-media is a term for a variety of highly interactive, visually influential Internet formats (Li & Leckenby 2004). Rich-media uses vector-based graphics, streaming audio and video, Java-powered interactivity, and other forms of multimedia to deliver enhanced messages, which aims to improve user response. Rich-media operates under the assumption that messages that appeal to multiple perceptual systems are better perceived than those that call on a single or fewer perceptual system, and that high quality messages are more effective than low quality messages (Reeves & Nass, 1996).

Interactive Graphic Novels

As of late, IGNs have become a popular medium for designers and developers to communicate stories, ideas, and content to online users. IGNs are unique because they give users the ability to control the pace of the story through the use of parallax scrolling techniques or simple click-through features. Research has found that users are more accurate in recalling controlled information than those not given control (George-Palilonis & Spillman, 2013).

IGNs are also a very new concept and continue to evolve as creativity and web technologies advance. IGNs rely on movement and visual appeal to tell stories. Sears and Jacko (2007) found that “emotional design seeks to make interactive products not only more efficient, but also more pleasant.” It has been demonstrated that high levels of visual appeal creates positive emotions in users (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). Comics and graphic novels also rely on visual appeal to make narratives more appealing.

IGNs draw users to sites because they are considered a novel way to present information on a website. Radford and Bloch (2011) found that people exhibited more positive responses to novel products. Frederick (2013) states that when an individual interacts with something unknown, speaking directly at web layouts and websites, it creates pleasure and that, in turn positively influences the user experience online. Biederman and Vessel (2006) state that humans take pleasure in acquiring new information and interacting with unfamiliar objects such as hybrid advertising techniques and new user friendly web-based technologies.

Interactive Graphic Novels as an Advertising Tactic

Only recently have marketers used IGNs to attract and engage online users. IGNs, considered a hybrid advertising technique, use rich-media, user-based interactivity, and traditional narrative elements to tell stories and communicate messages. IGNs used as an advertising tactic can be described as a form of branded entertainment; a popular advertising strategy that imbeds branded messages in entertainment-oriented media content (Wise et al., 2008). When dealing with IGNs, developers can control through sequencing when and how messages are experienced. Partial control through navigation and pacing is left to users. This allows users to interact with the content at their own pace, rather than simply sitting back and observing something like a commercial.

Traditional comics and graphic novels have always relied on vivid and emotionally appealing artwork and content. Many advertising and marketing professionals believe that increasing the vividness of a message can enhance its persuasiveness. Appiah (2006) states that “information may be described as vivid, that is, as likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination, to the extent that it is: (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal or special way” (p. 45). Prensky (2001) states that consumers and Internet users engage in more media multi-tasking, and are easily distracted and prone to navigate and interact with stimulating sites. This gives advertisers the ability to attract online users with vivid and emotionally appealing content.

Due to visual appeal, novelty in design, and a generally higher level of interactivity, IGNs can be used as a tool to help advertisers differentiate themselves from the competition and possibly gain an advantage in the marketplace. This researcher found that IGNs are heavily spread and shared through social media sites like Twitter and Reddit and are praised for their individuality. Advertisers and developers who create popular

IGNs will most likely see their content passed around to thousands of users on popular social networks. Past research indicates that online word-of-mouth is more effective when it comes from independent sources, such as Reddit and Twitter (Hill & Moran, 2011).

However, rich-media and the development of IGNs for advertising purposes are expensive to produce and require a long time to develop. Many professionals do not believe that interactive media tools such as IGNs are sustainable for advertising and marketing campaigns.

Uses And Gratification Theory

The uses and gratification theory is central to this research. This theory assumes that people actively seek out media to gratify a wide range of personal needs (LaRose, et al., 2001). This theory has been applied to examine consumer experiences associated with websites and online media, such as web advertisements and the overall user/consumer experience. The uses and gratification theory has multiple underlying constructs relating to entertainment, *informativeness*, and irritation. These underlying constructs directly apply to the current research.

The entertainment construct refers to the extent to which web media is fun and entertaining to users (Eighmey & McCord, 1998). Previous research on this construct has shown that the “value of media and entertainment lies in its ability to satisfy a user’s need for escapism, hedonistic pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, and/or emotional release” (McQuail, 1983). This leads to a longer duration interacting with the entertaining media, a higher probability in communicating it to others, such as through social networking or word-of-mouth, and a higher probability that the user will return to the media or type of media at a later time. Stern and Zaichowsky (1991) state that users who perceive a banner ad on the web as entertaining leads to more brand loyalty and a higher chance of purchasing products associated with the brand. In a related study, Chen and Wells (1999) found that ad entertainment is positively related to ad value and a user’s attitude toward the site where the advertisement actually exists.

The informativeness construct in relation to the uses and gratification theory refers to how the Internet, and more specifically web pages, can provide users with resourceful and helpful information. Bauer and Greyser (1968) suggest that media users consider advertising’s ability to provide audience with information the fundamental reason for accepting an ad in the first place. Hulu.com gives users the ability to select whether or not an advertisement is relevant to them. Therefore Hulu.com can regulate content seen by users based on their personal preference and information they want to experience or information they don’t want to experience, thus increasing the value per advertisement. Ducoffe (1995) found that there is a positive correlation between *informativeness* and advertising value, and attitude toward advertising.

Irritation refers to the extent in which web pages and online ad layouts appear messy and irritating to users. Ducoffe (1995) found that irritating banner ads may exploit human anxiety, distract consumers’ attention, and dilute human experiences. Bauer and Greyser (1968) found that people criticize advertising and marketing mostly due to the annoyance or irritation that advertising can cause. Ducoffe (1996) further states that irritation and ad value are negatively correlated.

This research seeks to understand IGNs and their potential to communicate information. Overall, this research seeks to check if IGNs can be used as a viable marketing/advertising tactic today.

RQ1: How does rich-media and interactive media impact the narrative structure of IGNs?

RQ2: Are IGNs a viable marketing/advertising tactic?

RQ3: Are IGNs appealing to users?

III. Methodology

A content analysis was used to determine implications regarding the above research questions. Since IGNs are new and relatively unstudied, this research took an exploratory approach.

Five interactive graphic novels were selected for the content analysis. Each IGN was found by searching “interactive graphic novel” via Twitter. The pool found through the Twitter search was narrowed to include IGNs that related to a particular brand or concept. The first five located were used in the present study. The researcher coded the IGNs for six categories. They are type of message and the following five

categories.

Narrative Structure

It was necessary to record the narrative structure to bring to light Fisher's Narrative Paradigm and to note whether persuading through storytelling can be applied to this research. In the current study, IGNs can either be linear or non-linear. Linear stories consist of a fixed plot that cannot be altered, while non-linear refers to a plot that can be altered.

Level of Interactivity

This researcher recorded the level of interactivity to see if different levels of interactivity impacted popularity, length, or other aspects of IGNs. Three levels of interactivity were considered:

- A low level of interactivity requires a user to simply click through or scroll through content like turning a page in a book.
- A medium level of interactivity is classified as having the ability to zoom, parallax-scrolling features, the ability to interact with the content in some way, sound effects, videos, etc.
- A high level of interactivity is classified as giving the users the ability to change the outcome of the narrative structure (non-linear).

Rich-Media Features

Rich-media features refer to the way in which various media is presented. Examples include:

- Pop-ups: content that automatically appears at a certain point in the story
- Animation: moving graphics
- Audio: background audio and pre-timed audio
- Videos: clickable videos that offers more content
- Illustrations

Twitter posts

Many web developers and content designers regularly share content that they find interesting with their social networks. For this reason Twitter posts were recorded to gauge online popularity for each IGN used in this study. The number of positive posts was recorded.

Length

Each IGN is measured as short, medium, or long, depending on its total length. A short IGN generally takes less than one minute to complete; less than two minutes for a medium IGN, and more than two minutes for a long IGN.

IV. Findings and Discussion

Appealing to Multiple Perceptual Systems

New web technologies give developers and marketers the power to add sound and interactivity to static and moving visuals like never before. It is evident through this research that appealing to multiple perceptual systems increases the effectiveness of a communicated message. IGNs have the ability to better immerse users into storylines on a deeper level than traditional narratives and literary devices. Eisner (1985) states that pictorial writings give readers a chance to become *active participants* in stories by presenting content in graphically appealing and stimulating ways, such as through the use of speech bubbles or comic book like scenes. The IGNs used in this research paper commonly used sound, touch and feel through interactivity, and visuals so that they can appeal to different human senses and make a narrative more interesting and engaging. Wurman (2000) states that "Interaction with information is what enables possession." One can

conclude that the more senses targeted through IGNs, the more likely an audience member will absorb the information.

Using Sound To Create Mood

Sound was present in a number of the IGNs used in this research. In many cases, background sound was used to set the mood. In the case of *The Walking Dead - Zombiefied*, developers incorporated the show's opening title audio sequence to help users further connect to the show. This music was played throughout. *Peugeot HYbrid4* played timed audio arrangements as users scrolled through the narrative. Each scene would trigger and repeatedly play audio relevant to the activated scene. *Ryse Digital Interactive Graphic Novel Issue 1* used audio on specific interactive elements. Users clicked on a character and relevant audio would play.

Pacing and Visuals

Primary research uncovered that visuals were enhanced mainly by user-controlled movement. Similar to traditional video, images within IGNs have the ability to move around screen in pre-determined ways to create a more aesthetically pleasing experience. Unlike traditional video, however, IGNs give users the ability to control the pace. In *America: Elect!* graphics are enhanced by using the parallax scrolling technique. George-Palilonis and Spillman (2013) stated that people could more accurately remember content when they were in control of the rate at which information was consumed. This phenomenon can be used to create more memorable messages in online and mobile advertisements where the user has the ability to impact the pace of information consumption without disrupting the narrative.

Advertising and marketers can use the findings on interactivity and pacing to develop tactics that could potentially replace traditional online commercials. Adding interactive elements to web commercials, like those seen on Hulu.com, could potentially have a huge impact on message communication and online advertising.

IGNs and Social Sharing

Twitter posts were recorded to cross-examine IGNs and their online popularity. This cross analysis was important to gain insights on how social media can increase ad value. Two occurrences were observed:

1. The level of interactivity and Twitter posts were positively correlated.
2. Length and Twitter posts were negatively correlated.

The positive correlation between the level of interactivity and Twitter posts is most likely due to their novelty aspect. Radford and Bloch (2011) found that people showed positive responses to novel products when compared to products that they were familiar with. IGNs with a high level of interactivity suggest that people were more excited to interact with the advanced technology and less excited about IGNs categorized as having a low level of interactivity. *The Walking Dead - Zombiefied*, which had the most rich-media features in the selected sample, had the most number of tweets.

The negative correlation between length and Twitter posts may be explained by online users' short attention span. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the average attention span for an online user is only eight seconds ("Attention Span Statistics"). *Ryse Digital Interactive Graphic Novel Issue 1*, the longest IGN included in this study, also had the least number of Twitter posts. *The Walking Dead - Zombiefied*, considered a short IGN, had the most.

IGNs And the Uses and Gratification Theory

In a previous section, this research outlined and described the three underlying constructs of the Uses and Gratification Theory: entertainment, informativeness, and irritation. It was stated earlier that the "value of media and entertainment lies in its ability to satisfy a user's need for escapism, hedonistic pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, and/or emotional release" (McQuail, 1983). The IGNs studied in this paper show that the inclusion of narrative aspects can enhance a user's attempt at escapism. By using the traditional comic and graphic novel framework, IGNs allow users to enhance their ability to become active participants in the content. By pairing traditional comic and graphic novel techniques with interactive and rich-media features, developers can add to the overall experience and immerse the user into the content on a deeper level where

he/she can have a deeper emotional response.

Recommendations For Future Research

This researcher found it interesting that the short attention spans of online users could have an impact on the popularity of online content and the message retention of an advertisement. The attention span of online users was not a key element to this research. However, studying the effect that rich-media and interactivity has on the average attention span of online users would possibly yield important results for crafting online ad content.

It would also be beneficial for future research to focus on interactive advertising in an attempt to find value in replacing traditional online advertising such as web commercials and online banners with interactive content, while focusing on how interactive elements impact ad effectiveness and user response.

V. Conclusion

In summation, the present study supports the notion that IGNs are a sustainable tactic for advertising and marketing professionals with the means to create them. If anything, IGNs ability to appeal to multiple human senses makes it a powerful tool to communicate messages. IGNs are also able to harness the power of persuading through storytelling. At the present time, IGNs are a rather new concept, so online users have repeatedly praised them. Attempting to harness the power of social media will continue to serve as a challenge to advertising and marketing professionals.

It should be noted that some IGNs had a social media feature, so users can automatically post a tweet about the IGN. Also, future research can include more IGNs to gain more generalizable insights.

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