

PLAYERS YET TO FIND THE GAME

Next-generation handsets and new technologies have made mobile games an area of rich potential. But marketers are yet to capitalise on it.

BRETT ROLFE
E-marketing



THERE has been a lot of talk about mobile marketing opportunities following the advent of 3G networks and next-generation handsets.

One exciting area that has started to emerge as a result is mobile advergaming.

Advergaming leverages the growing popularity of games on mobile phones, using new technologies to target messaging to individuals on the basis of location, demographics, or personal preferences. One of the few development groups focusing on this area is US-based Thumbworks, which has developed a motocross game for Suzuki featuring Suzuki motorcycles.

The group has numerous other mobile advergaming titles in the works, including a Jeep promotion for Chrysler.

The production of computer games has often been closely tied to marketing, ranging from in-game product placement (such as brand-name cars in automotive games) to merchandising (as more and more blockbuster movies are supported by console-game titles).

The development of wholly-branded experiences for advertisers has always been problematic due to the serious investment in time and money required — the US Army's innovatively titled 'America's Army' cost a reported US\$7m to build.

The alternative has been smaller, less complex games that are much more viable cost-wise, but pale in comparison to the sort of games a teenager can pick up at any store.

It's hard to build an affordable promotional game that stacks up against Quake 3.

Mobile games currently offer a solution to that problem, with the scope of development limited due to the nature of the device itself.

Processing power and display logistics mean that games must be simple, allowing imaginative, low-budget games to compete with those coming out of larger development houses.

These games can also be deployed using the wireless platform, meaning they are ideal as low-value competition prizes, or as part of a direct campaign.

For the most part, mobile games developed to date have either been low-budget puzzle and platform games, adaptations of console properties (Sonic, Splinter Cell and Tony Hawk Pro Skater), or entertainment promotions (Charlie's Angels: Road Cyclone, Lord of the Rings Strategy).

This leaves the space wide open for a first generation of high cut-through mobile advergaming.

Australian mobile marketing has progressed from branded ring-tones and logos to a range of polyphonic tones and SMS games.

The next obvious step is downloadable advergaming, eventually moving to client/server games — games that are downloaded, but which use wireless technology to update themselves, or facilitate multiple players.

As advergaming makes the transition from small, online, flash 'toys' to more serious, coded mobile games, more serious game developers will be needed.

Fortunately, Australia has no shortage of these, with houses ranging from Tantalus Interactive (Unreal II for the Xbox) to Torus Games (Minority Report for Gameboy).

These games houses are beginning to skill-up in mobile game technology.

Numerous other companies are also positioning themselves for possible roles in this promising marketplace — from infrastructure providers (5th Finger) and content portals (Blue Sky Frog), to online advergaming developers such as MassMedia Studios (games for nineMSN, Accor), Amnesia Creative



Sonic: Developed for Nokia's new 'crossover' mobile phone/gaming console, the N-Gage.



Suzuki Motocross Challenge: Thumbworks' first advergaming venture.



(games for Disney, Lion Nathan), and Massive (games for Mondo, Pizza Haven).

One challenge with which the digital agencies will be very familiar is the global nature of mobile game development. Brands will tend to locally deploy games developed elsewhere rather than building them in the local market.

Conversely, Australia is an excellent development location if global brands can be educated about the potential.

With government initiatives such as the Victorian 'Game Plan', Australia is becoming a centre of excellence for game development, which could be built on to make it a hotbed for mobile advergaming.

Until now, mobile interaction has been limited to SMS — not a very viable channel for a rich brand experience.

But with the new generation of mobile handsets, that type of immersion will fast become a reality.

And if the present looks good for mobile advergaming, the future looks even better.

Two huge areas of potential for marketers are locality and occasion-based play.

Imagine a game developed as part of a marketing promotion that invites the consumer to play further when he or she is in a particular location.

Performance in the game could be rewarded with coupons for immediate redemption at a nearby retail outlet.

Or a game that releases new levels each weekday after

school, raising awareness of a specific snack food brand.

In these ways, mobile phone games avoid the need to constantly retain top-of-mind presence by empowering the brand to prompt recall at time and in particular locations where there is the desire or means for the player to purchase.

Despite these strengths, mobile advergaming is not taking Australia by storm.

Fundamentally, the approach is limited by adoption curves of compatible handsets, which are no longer low-cost items.

The mix of technologies (particularly within the Australian telecommunications environment) makes development and deployment non-trivial.

And with a market of fewer than 20 million in Australia, game development will be difficult to justify for the domestic market alone.

Yet the technology is here to stay, and the potential for its use in marketing campaigns is certainly there.

It is up to the players in the market to generate the interest and awareness that will make the potential of mobile advergaming a reality.

Brett Rolfe is a freelance digital consultant.
E:brett@digitalstrategist.com

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BRETT ROLFE

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