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More Marketers Are Grabbing the Attention of Players During Online Games

By LOUISE STORY

CASUAL game sites have learned how to play the ad game.

The sites – which offer puzzle and strategy games – once focused on selling the actual games after the dot-com bust drove many advertisers away. But these days, they are becoming popular marketing spots as they begin to accept more branded messages.

Last year, advertisers spent about \$150 million buying space on casual game sites or in the games themselves, up from \$74 million in 2002, according to DFC Intelligence, a game industry research firm in San Diego.

This is all possible, of course, because advertisers are increasingly interested in reaching the diverse group of Web users who like to solve puzzles, play word games and decipher mind benders online.

In December, about 65.9 million people played online games, which include puzzle games and action video games. That was up 13 percent from December 2005, when 58.4 million clicked online for a quick round, according to comScore Networks, an Internet research firm. While traditional action games still draw more men than women, casual games are more popular with women and

BIG FISH Games Click "Start" to choose a sponsor and play
Same great game, now you get to choose your own ads

	Senseo® Coffee Pod System - Lets you savor a serving of fresh gourmet coffee just the way you like it
	Hoover WindTunnel2 rebate - Get up to \$100 off a Hoover WindTunnel2 & FloorMate
	Get 25 Free Songs from eMusic - Plays on the iPod. Songs as low as \$0.25 with your paid subscription.
	Save up to 75% on Cruises - Register for instant access to last-minute discounts. VacationsToGo.com.
	Windows Live Search - Why on Earth does the world need another search engine? Try Live Search at Live.com - Live is good.
	Buy Stocks for \$4, Get \$25. - No Minimum Required to Open an Account. No Inactivity Fees. Learn more.
	FREE Disney Parks Vacation Planning DVD - Experience the Magic in Your Home! Order yours today!

Note: Choosing a sponsor will not alter your game experience.

[What is this?](#) [No Thanks. Continue to game.](#)

offer the kind of friendly online experience that ad executives say companies want to be associated with.

Big Fish Games, a casual game site known for its game Mystery Case Files, for example, says about 75 percent of its visitors each month are women. And, according to Forrester Research, about 51 percent of people over age 30 play online games.

"The gamer is actually a much more of a mainstream consumer than you may think," said Shar VanBoskirk, a senior analyst with Forrester Research. "Consumers are really filtering out advertiser messages, and games are one way that they're actually still engaged."

PopCap Games, a company known for the Bejeweled puzzle game, is testing ads in the premiere versions of its games. Like many online games, PopCap's are available in two versions – a free basic version and a fancier version for a fee, which it calls premiere. Traditionally, Web surfers tried the fancy version free for an hour before deciding whether to buy it.

Now, under a test PopCap is running with its game Zuma, consumers can download the fancy version and play it without ever paying – if they are willing to see ads.

AOL Games, a unit of Time Warner, is testing ads in the one-hour trial version of its deluxe

games, said Ralph Rivera, vice president and general manager of AOL Games. About 95 percent of people who try games do not end up paying for the deluxe version, he said, and AOL would like to reach those users in some way.

"Within AOL, games is only second to e-mail and I.M. as far as time spent per user, so you're talking about a very highly engaged audience," Mr. Rivera said. "Any time you have a highly engaged audience, you have advertisers who are looking to get in front of that audience."

Big Fish Games charges for downloads of games and also carries about 200 free puzzle and strategy games online, with ads. Starting last month, visitors who clicked on their first free online game of the day got a Sponsor Select pop-up screen giving them a choice of ads for that game.

About 25 percent of the people who play games on Big Fish have chosen to pick their advertisers, according to AWS Convergence Technologies, the company that operates Sponsor Select.

Yesterday, for example, visitors could select either Better Homes and Gardens, Orchard Bank MasterCard or Windows Live Search to be the sole advertiser in the first game they played.

The rest of the games they played showed them a variety of ads.

"You're going to get ads no matter what," said Paul Thelen, chief executive of Big Fish Games. "The advantage of Sponsor Select is it's more likely to be relevant to you."

Big Fish started offering free games online a year and a half ago. Four years ago, after the dot-com bust, it was not possible to make much money from ad-supported games, Mr. Thelen said. Now that is changing. While Big Fish still makes most of its money from user-paid downloads, its fastest-growing revenue area is its advertising.

Whereas advertising in games used to be specialized, involving a lot of negotiation, the growing number of ad options for casual games is making game advertising more accessible to brands that once focused on traditional advertising, ad executives said.

"You don't have to be as adventurous or as bold to make it happen now," said Art Sindlinger, vice president and activation director at Starcom USA, a Publicis Groupe media-buying agency.

One appealing aspect of casual games is that players often start friendly dialogues with each

other, and brands can associate themselves with that community building, said Saneel Radia, vice president and group director of Play, a gaming division of Denuo, which is part of the Publicis Groupe.

"If you look at the communication on a board of pool in Yahoo Games, it's, 'Oh, where's your family from?' " Mr. Radia said. "Go to Xbox Live, and it's, 'I'm going to crush you.' "

Some advertisers have taken casual gaming a step further, creating their own casual games – sometimes called advergames – and posting them on their Web sites.

When the Dodge Caliber came out last spring, the Chrysler Group, part of DaimlerChrysler, posted five casual games on its site, and one called Caliber Buzz was played three million times within a month, said Vanessa Kelley, manager of cross-brand gaming at Chrysler. Online games are now a regular part of Chrysler car debuts, she said.

"It's the wave," Ms. Kelley said. "These people don't watch television all that much. They are online. They're playing games."