

# Customer Placement

**Advertising:** The latest marketing trend makes the consumer a player inside the commercial.

BY SARAH SENNOTT

**D**URING THE SUMMER OF 2001, Mitsubishi's American dealerships were suddenly flooded with puzzling requests for the Lancer Evolution. Mitsubishi had never marketed this flashy compact sports car with a 271-horsepower engine in America. Where was all the interest coming from? The answer is exciting advertisers the world over: videogames. Sony PlayStation 2 had featured the Lancer Evolution in a new version of Gran Turismo, a top-selling racing-car game released that July. The result was a cultlike following for the car. "We were spammed by gamers," recalls Ian Beavis, senior vice president of marketing at Mitsubishi North America. Two years later the Lancer Evolution was released in America, and has been a big success. "It's a true testament to the power of that medium."

Threatened by declining TV ratings in some countries, advertisers have been looking for new ways to capture the wandering eye of the consumer, from producing short ads-cum-movies to increasingly aggressive product placement on popular shows. But the newest trend goes beyond trying to divert eyes to a strategically placed cereal box for a few brief seconds: instead companies are looking to place the customer inside an advertising game, or "advergame," almost indefinitely. "You are now in the world the advertiser has created for you," says advergame designer Dan Ferguson.

Several corporate giants have recently launched advergames. One from Nokia uses a snow-sledding game to promote text messaging. After each race your results are messaged to a phone that pops up on screen. Special, speedier sleds can be unlocked only by texting yourself a secret password. A new game from Lipton features an office worker winding through cubicles gobbling up Cup-a-Soups to "Beat the 3PM Slump." Kraft Foods draws more than 3 million visitors a month to its Web site of 80 different downloadable games—



**PLAY TO BUY:** A cell-phone game from Nokia; the Mitsubishi gamers drove on their PS2s; a new Army recruiting tool; an advergame for Lipton's Cup-a-Soup

like mini-golf, bowling and puzzles—incorporating its brands. "Every ad today is a victim of multitasking," says Michael Wood, director of Cocosambo, a London-based branding-entertainment agency. "Gaming draws the most engaged, concentrated audience."

The advantages for advertisers are clear: games are now available on virtually any digital platform, from TVs to PCs and mobile phones. Contrary to common belief, the booming global-gaming market is not dominated by teenage males, which gives it a potentially broad reach as an advertising medium. More than 50 percent of the players are 35 or older, and while males still dominate, females are increasingly active, particularly online. Unlike a television ad or billboard, advergames, which are so

far available only through Web sites, offer traceable results, including the number of visits to any site and for exactly how long. After the initial cost of production (anywhere from \$30,000 to \$500,000), advergames can run virtually free for years. In a recent U.S. Association of National Advertisers survey, 45 percent of companies anticipate relocating ad dollars from TV to other media during the next year. Nine percent said they had advertised via videogames in the past year, and 13 percent planned to in the future.

The U.S. Army spends \$2.5 million a year on its recruiting advergame, America's



Army. At least 3.7 million people have logged on to track down terrorists or rescue POWs in realistic simulations, and the Army says the game helped it reach recruitment targets last year, despite the difficult political climate. "People can zero in on specific interests, like parachuting or being a medic," says Col. Casey Wardynski, project director of America's Army. "What emerges is a level of confidence about the challenges they may encounter. That's a whole lot more than a 30-second spot that says, 'Hey, think about the Army.'"

The momentum is building. Last month the first videogame advertising agency, Massive, was launched. Already, America's Army players can tune the in-game radio to any station they wish. And with bandwidth getting cheaper and cheaper, says Colonel Wardynski, "soon, anything you can do in real life, you'll be able to do in these games." It used to be that catchy ads stuck in one's head. Now one's head is liable to get stuck in the ads. ■