



User experience starts before the game

In the digital age, and with more and more developers self-publishing, a new knowledge of games packaging is an essential skill. Brand expert **Steve Osborne** is here to help you make your game stand out on retail shelves

Video games are fighting for attention against cut-price DVDs and other media in the retail space

IT WAS NEWS about the shift taking place in the games industry that pricked my interest. Games sales in the US were down 42 per cent in April 2012 compared with the same month in 2011, according to the *LA Times*.

The reason, apparently, is the explosive growth of social gaming, mostly being played on smartphones and tablets.

So will the industry follow the same path as the record industry and become dominated by downloads? Already there are signs in the High Street, with UK retailer Game seemingly heading the way of HMV – a vastly reduced number of stores for technophobic laggards who still prefer to hold their purchases in their hands. Like me for instance, but hey, I've been known to buy the CD of an album I've already downloaded – and paid for.

Actually, technophobia isn't the reason at all, it's the added value that packaging brings to the experience of consuming the product. And if there is to be a, albeit smaller, market for retailing games in the future, then a focus on their packaging is overdue.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In my day job for the last 20 years, designing packaging for slightly more tangible products – like biscuits, yogurt and beer – it has long been known that people don't consciously distinguish the packaging from its product. We buy a can of deodorant, a bottle of beer and a packet of crisps.

This is fairly obvious, but it hides a near magical trick that packaging performs every day without even trying. The attributes of the packaging – for example, smoothness, elegance, naturalness and so on – become transferred to the experience of the product, and the brand. So, for instance, Evian's unique pale blue plastic bottle, translucent cap and pink mountain landscape makes the water look, and taste, colder than other brands – told you it was magic.

Called 'sensation transference', the effect was first identified by Louis Cheskin in the 1940s. It is the principle behind the familiar 'blind versus branded' taste test, where consumer preference for a product switches

depending on whether they see the packaging or not.

In one of the most famous examples, the taste of Pepsi was preferred to that of Coke 'blind', but the opposite was true when drunk from the packaging. This and many other examples show conclusively that we taste the brand just as much as the actual product. And packaging is part of both.

In gaming terms, you could say that the packaging becomes part of the user experience itself.

But in the relentless digitisation of music, video, books and now games, this role of packaging risks being lost.

THE LOST WORLD

The first computer games were fairly crude by today's standards, but many that are regarded as classics by fans enhanced their UX through handsome bookshelf-boxes that contained books and other thoughtful add-ins. Nowadays, the UX is delivered by film-quality graphics, force feedback,



rumble technology and even instructions delivered in-game. As a consequence, packaging for games is often indistinguishable from CD music or DVD movie counterparts.

Interestingly, record shops are starting to emphasise the more tangible aspect of buying music, and have even brought back a form of packaging that predates the CD: the vinyl record. While I haven't yet witnessed the parallel trend of a row of record decks in Dixons, these – often young – consumers must be playing their records on something. And buying them for a reason.

So what does all this mean for games packaging? With a design budget of millions, and even their own music score for many of the biggest titles, is it good enough to package them in a plastic box that's identical to the one across the aisle for ten-year-old movies at two-for-a-tenner? I don't think so.

Graphically, there's no shortage of dramatic 'key visuals' available from games themselves, but a key visual does not make a brand. Those goblins, busty heroines, steroidal maniacs and GIs do tend to blend into one another after a while.

Back in the supermarket, Evian manages to differentiate itself from a lot of eager competitors who also want to be the most refreshing water available. This requires two things: working out the unique brand story; and strategic design skills to translate this into desirable, standout design codes.

These work on a 2D and 3D level, and include codes for far more than the product. Evian might be a refreshing water, but it's also French, alpine, sporty, and a bit cosmetic.

EVERY PACKET TELLS A STORY

By the same process, most games promise energy, excitement and adventure, so that's what we see on the packaging. But what

differentiates your brand to be worthy of the name is something at a higher level, and it's this that the packaging design should be aiming for.

Differentiation and brand values can be delivered in one big hit with a strong character, and so it's not surprising that both movies and games use these leading assets, often to excellent effect. When your characters are not well-known or new, then branding and packaging needs to work a lot harder to help tell the story.

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Steve Osborne, Osborne Pike

An interesting development in gaming is the opportunity to merge the virtual, and screen-based with the real and tangible. Nintendo's Wii was the real groundbreaker here, but it's a sign of the blistering pace of technological change that the brand feels like an early pioneer, not really cutting-edge.

However, I was intrigued to see the *Skylanders* game in the shop window the other day, using packaging to good effect to tell a bigger story. Good, but far from great: I can see it's a blend of digital with some good old-fashioned plastic toy characters, thanks to the windows in the box and some strategically placed character packs. But the reassurance of the Wii and PS3 brands are hard to spot, as is the point of the game, assuming seven-year-olds need one.

I'm sure this is all explained in the TV ad or even by reading the box, but the best packaging doesn't need that much commitment to convey its product.

Another development in the supermarket owes a lot to the gaming world – digital enhancements built into packaging to enhance the brand experience.

It was over three years ago when LEGO pioneered augmented reality technology to allow shoppers to see a fully-constructed toy as a 3D image outside the packaging at the point of sale, and things have moved on considerably since then.

For example, Red Bull-drinkers could collect cans and line them up to create a racing track. Using an iPhone to photograph the front of the cans for calibration, an app generated a virtual version of the track, which could then be raced with a virtual car. The more cans, the more fun the track design.

Suremen deodorant recently created a pack-based campaign in which cans become game controllers to help players face a range of adventurous challenges from mountain-biking to water-skiing, all in a bid to win cash prizes or sports gear.

Clearly, there are great opportunities for the games market to use some of these exciting digital and physical enhancements in its own packaging. But before it does I would suggest that it could learn a lot from the basic packaging principles that are second nature in the supermarket: brand differentiation, information hierarchy and sensation transference, all wrapped up in a great story. ■

Steve Osborne has been impressed by Activision's *Skylanders* packaging (above)



Steve Osborne is a partner at the Osborne Pike: Branding and Packaging Consultancy, and is an expert in brand design strategy and execution, concept writing, brand hierarchy and brand archotyping.
www.osbornepike.co.uk