

# To Brand or Not to Brand: The Perception of Brand Image in the Digital Games Industry

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## ABSTRACT:

The paper presents, discusses and analyses the role of building brand image in digital games. The purpose of this paper is to analyse and discuss in-game marketing in cultural spheres from the aspect of brand image. The aim is to explore, identify and present the relationship between brand image, consumer self-image and digital games as a brand. The contribution of this study is manifested in an interdisciplinary approach to work through marketing, psychology, sociology, and media theory. Consumers project their desires through digital games, and the brand's entry into the digital game itself enhances the gaming experience and reality of the digital game. It was concluded that consumers want a realistic experience while playing digital games and they want to see famous brands within the game as this enhances their experience and projects the reality of the digital world. The core of brand image is consumers' perception. In recent years, the digital game industry dominates this segment of the global entertainment economy. The paper analyses in-game marketing from the aspect of branding and sociology of culture. It is based on J. N. Kapferer's theory of brand building and Huzinga's theory of game. The article explores the meaning of the phenomenon of brand image and identity in virtual reality. The emphasis in this paper is put on the influence of brand image and digital game as a model of popular culture. This article adopts an integrated knowledge inquiry approach through thematic analysis to explain the concept of brand image. From the consumer's point of view, the brand represents a symbol built on impressions, associations, metaphors and archetypes in the digital gaming industry. Brand loyalty is a key factor in building brand equity. The problem of brand loyalty appears as a reflection of brand symbol and its image. However, the oxymoron of in-game marketing starts from the hypothesis that consumers want to see brands in virtual reality.

## KEY WORDS:

brand, culture, digital game, image, in-game marketing.

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# Introduction

If we paraphrase Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, more precisely the quote "*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women mere players*"<sup>1</sup> with cultural game theory,<sup>2</sup> we can portray the future in the context of a digital game. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the average gamer is 35 years old<sup>3</sup> and 26% of them are 50+. Given the progression of the digital game industry, with today's percentage of players who will represent middle-aged players in about ten years, Shakespeare's prognosis seems to have come true. The paper is not about acting, at least not in terms of theatre theory<sup>4</sup> or literature theory,<sup>5</sup> but the need to adapt acting to win *someone* or *something*. This need to acquire someone or something, i.e. consumers and brand, brings us to brand identity, but not from the aspect of literature theory, but from the aspect

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1 SHAKESPEARE, W.: *As You Like It*. London : The Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 227.

2 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens*. Kettering : Angelico Press, 2016, p. 11-32.

3 2016 Annual Report 2016. 2016. [online]. [2020-11-05]. Available at: <<https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ESAAnnualReport2016.pdf>>.

4 BALME, B. C.: *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 65-78.

5 CULLER, J.: *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 19-43.

of marketing,<sup>6</sup> consumer behaviour<sup>7</sup> and brand theory.<sup>8</sup> The paper asks several research questions: can we view digital games as a brand, is the main character in digital game a brand extension, and do users want to see brand products in the digital world? To answer these questions, we used J. Huzinga's theory, cultural object theory,<sup>9</sup> and brand identity theory.<sup>10</sup> We presented the game in the context of psychoanalysis<sup>11</sup> and in the context of integrated marketing communication.<sup>12</sup> Then we linked brand image with the image of the main character in a digital game with the concept of real, existing brands. We will show the brand through several aspects. First, as a game itself that becomes the market leader or represents a market segment like *God of War*<sup>13</sup> or *The Last of Us*<sup>14</sup>, secondly the brand as an actual brand that consumers want to see in a game because it increases the reality of choosing brands like *Need for Speed: Payback*<sup>15</sup> and finally, we understand brand extension as these main characters from digital games who become the promotion of a corporate brand like Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*<sup>16</sup> and guest Geralt in *Soulcalibur VI*<sup>17</sup>.

The construction of identity elements in the digital game industry, i.e. in-game marketing, includes the theory of narratology<sup>18</sup> that creates the brand story. Creating the plot, game developers reach for archetypal heroes who create a specific brand identity. There is something paradoxical about the way the game is created in the digital game industry. Initially, the appearance of brands in the game was paid for, and today publishers are paid for the appearance of brands. The digital game industry or interactive entertainment is one of the fastest growing industries of the past decade. The evolution of digital games enables a wider and faster base of users, greater and easier access and ultimately a huge communication channel. If we know that the digital game industry has generated a record 36 billion USD and 19% growth rate, a dilemma from the title, brand or not to brand imposes several *existential* questions. Can we think of a digital game as a brand with all its features? Does the protagonist act as a brand extension? Does the theory of corporate identity and corporate marketing apply equally to the digital marketing and virtual worlds? And what about brands in games, or brands in game genres? And finally, can we influence the perception of brand image in the digital game industry?

## Virtual World and Consumers

The problem of virtual worlds is controversial and has given rise to many controversies. On one hand, there is research describing the effects of games on addiction and

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- 6 KOTLER, P., KELLER, K. L.: *Marketing Management*. Upper Saddle River : Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006, p. 27.
  - 7 SOLOMON, M., BAMOSSY, G., ASKEGAARD, S., HOGG, M. K.: *Consumer Behavior, European Perspective*. London : Prentice Hall, 2009, p. 118.
  - 8 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 171-197.
  - 9 GRISWOLD, W.: *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. London : Sage Publications, 2013, p. 4-18.
  - 10 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 171-197.
  - 11 FREUD, S.: *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse. Die Zukunft einer Illusion*. Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Verlag, 2005, p. 74.
  - 12 KESIC, T.: *Integrirana marketinška komunikacija*. Zagreb : Opinio, 2003, p. 28-34.
  - 13 SANTA MONICA STUDIO: *God of War*. [digital game]. Santa Monica : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.
  - 14 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us*. [digital game]. Santa Monica : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2014.
  - 15 GHOST GAMES: *Need for Speed: Payback (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. Redwood City : Electronic Arts, 2017.
  - 16 CD PROJEKT RED: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. Warsaw : CD Projekt, 2015.
  - 17 BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS: *Soulcalibur VI*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2018.
  - 18 FLUDERNIK, M.: *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York : Routledge, 2009, p. 46.

depression.<sup>19</sup> At the same time studies show how digital technology brings great benefits.<sup>20</sup> Recent research suggests that digital gaming positively influences cognitive, emotional and social development.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the problem of virtual worlds is not only the problem of an aggressive subject but also of a passive subject. The term subject is understood here as a culture of media that is axiomatic and denotes contemporary existence through perception. So we take the subject as a postmodern consumer. But since the topic of this paper is the perception of brand image in the virtual world and brand analysis in games, we will limit the discussion to two aspects. The first aspect relates to the phenomenon of the game as a media, as a new cultural phenotype that opens the market to a growing number of consumers. The second aspect relates to brand influence, i.e. identity and image analysis. This raises two important questions. Can we view the game as a cultural object<sup>22</sup> if we accept the model of *Homo Ludens*, and can we apply brand identity<sup>23</sup> and personality<sup>24</sup> to the archetypes of heroes in virtual reality? At its core, virtualization of reality contains a paradox. The virtual world imitates the real world and takes on economic, social, psychological and ethical issues. The paradox is manifested in the dichotomy of addiction to games and games without addiction.

Cyberspace is a degraded copy of reality<sup>25</sup> that characterizes a fundamental loss of orientation. Cyberspace is a new form of perspective, i.e. a tactile perspective. In this sense, the tactile perspective represents a new consumer paradigm because seeing at a distance, hearing at a distance – such was the basis of the visual and acoustic perspective that is now shifting to a new field of communication. We are fast approaching a point where one third of the global population will play digital games on a regular basis. As such, digital gaming ought to become a serious object of philosophy, not least because of its impact on players' perception.<sup>26</sup> After all, the term gamer, that most contemporary of subjects, alludes to the psychoanalytical reading of the position of the gamer in the relation to the gaming dreamworld.<sup>27</sup> We turn the inner world outwards,<sup>28</sup> and the outer (real) world becomes the inner. Therefore, the development of virtual reality means that reality becomes like games. Subconscious desire is not so much fulfilled by technology<sup>29</sup> as it is shaped by it. Which came first, play or game?<sup>30</sup> If the game is a dream world and the gamer is just a traveller,<sup>31</sup> let's analyse the structure of the simulation. Virtual reality represents the dark

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- 19 CLARK, N., SCOTT, P. S.: *Game Addiction: the experience and the Effect*. London : McFarland Company, 2009, p. 91-115.; COVER, R.: Gaming (Ad)diction: Discourse, Identity, Time and Play in the Production of the Gamer addiction Myth. In *Game Studies*, 2006, Vol. 6, No. 1. [online]. [2020-11-03]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/cover>>; GRIFFITHS, M. D.: Does internet and computer "addiction" exist? Some case study evidence. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 216-217; CHAK, K., LEUNG, L.: Shyness and locus of control as predictors of Internet addiction and Internet use. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2004, Vol. 7, No. 5, p. 562-567.; KIM, J. H., LAU, C. H., CHEUK, K.-K., KAN, P.: Brief report: Predictors of heavy Internet use and associations with health-promoting and health risk behaviours among Hong Kong university students. In *Journal of Adolescents*, 2010, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 218.
- 20 BARANOWSKI, T., BUDAY, R., THOMPSON, D., BARANOWSKI, J.: Playing for real: video games and stories for health-related behaviour change. In *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 2008, Vol. 34, No. 1, p. 74-76.
- 21 GRANIC, I., LOBEL, A., ENGELS, R.: The Benefits of Playing Video Games. In *American Psychologist*, 2014, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 71-73.
- 22 GRISWOLD, W.: *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. London : Sage Publications, 2013, p. 16.
- 23 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 172-187.
- 24 AAKER, J. L.: Dimensions of Brand Personality. In *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1997, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 352.
- 25 VIRILIO, P.: Red alert in cyberspace!. In *Radical Philosophy*, 1995, Vol. 74, No. 1, p. 3.
- 26 WATSON, M.: Lucid dreaming. In *Radical Philosophy*, 2019, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 112. [online]. [2020-10-14]. Available at: <<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/lucid-dreaming>>.
- 27 BOWN, A.: *The PlayStation Dreamworld*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2018, p. 61-94.
- 28 WARK, M.: *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 57-74.
- 29 WATSON, M.: Lucid dreaming. In *Radical Philosophy*, 2019, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 113. [online]. [2020-10-14]. Available at: <<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/lucid-dreaming>>.
- 30 WARK, M.: *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 68.
- 31 BOWN, A.: *The PlayStation Dreamworld*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2018, p. 61-125.

side of the collective subject and it is a place of the unconscious, where there is no censorship. According to personality theory<sup>32</sup> it is the *Id*, the dark part of the psyche. It is a field of pure instinct, a place of energy release (*Besetzung*). This energy is suppressed due to the effect of censorship in the conscious state, but due to the relaxation of inhibitions in virtual reality, it is available to consumers. Therefore, games can be seen as versions of narratives that encompass associations that, according to S. Freud's,<sup>33</sup> are unconscious. This means that brand identity elements interact with consumers at two levels: the conscious and the unconscious. The first level includes the desired brand in games that serves as an *immersion* in reality, or the so-called simulation of reality, the second level includes the neuromarketing category, that is, starting from unconscious elements.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, digital games are free. The game itself allows relaxation of inhibitions, a prerequisite for unconscious content. In this way, we can understand the gamer community as a kind of mass in which individuals acquire a sense of power that enables them to experience instincts that they would otherwise restrain. These feelings allow the individual to act as a mass, but also to gain security in the mass.<sup>34</sup> Also, communication in games is suitable for the collective subject and is therefore comparable to psychoanalysis. The game can therefore reproduce the sender-recipient relationship, similar to the metaphor of a living organism,<sup>35</sup> where the sender is the brand identity and the recipient is the brand image. Because of this characteristic of the media, we can talk about the breakthrough of unconscious content in digital games. The role of the brand as a particular simulation of reality, as a simulacrum,<sup>36</sup> opens the space to the creation of consumer desires. Virtualization of reality tends to emulate, and therefore consumers want a reality simulation just as they want hero archetypes<sup>37</sup> as the initiator of that simulation. When a game's popularity reaches such a level that it starts to influence the games market, it might become a model, an archetype, giving rise to more games based on it.<sup>38</sup> In postmodern society,<sup>39</sup> consumers connect with brands, and the world market is no longer a seller's market, but a consumer market. Society is based on the production and exchange of images, and consumers have nothing to do with the reality that these images signify. By doing so, everything becomes simulated. This is also a criticism,<sup>40</sup> because then games as such simulations, together with brands, can present behaviour patterns and even replicate certain attitudes. Digital games are not a text to read but a dream to be dreamt. In a dream, unlike a book or movie, the individual dreamer experiences 'desires, anxieties, passions, and effects', yet they are also generally governed, to some greater or lesser extent, by the wishes of an external actor.<sup>41</sup>

Let's analyse virtual reality from a simulation perspective. Figure 1 shows the aspects of in-game marketing simulation. On the abscissa we observe progression and exposure, while on the ordinate we distinguish between reality and delusion. It is evident

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32 FREUD, S.: *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden, Band 15, Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*. Frankfurt am Main : S. Fischer Verlag, 1940, p. 80.

33 FREUD, S.: *Die Traumdeutung. Studienausgabe Band 2*. Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982, p. 577.

34 FREUD, S.: *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse. Die Zukunft einer Illusion*. Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Verlag, 2005, p. 78.

35 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 12.

36 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2017, p. 121-129.

37 VAN ECK, R.: *Gaming and Cognition: Theories and Practice from the Learning Science*. Hershey : Information Science Reference, 2010, p. 146.

38 MAGO, Z.: The Concept of Timelessness Applied to Advvergames. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 21.

39 BEST, S., KELLNER, D.: *Postmodern Theory*. New York : Guilford Press, 1991, p. 16.

40 BOWN, A.: *The PlayStation Dreamworld*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2018, p. 61-94.

41 WATSON, M.: Lucid dreaming. In *Radical Philosophy*, 2019, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 113. [online]. [2020-10-14]. Available at: <<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/lucid-dreaming>>.

that what is experienced in digital games manifests itself through image and therefore represents the consumer perspective, which ultimately makes for real brand knowledge. However, the elements of brand identity are viewed from an illusory point of view as they are constructive for the manufacturer perspective. The first aspect that the simulation refers to is the content problem, that is, the semblance that precludes introduction to the structure necessary to shape the game. An entity that plays the role of an e-athlete in the real world deepens brand loyalty. The consumer selects brands, designs, compares, and ultimately downloads behaviours that are similar to buying a brand. His stimuli, emotions, positive impressions, interaction in the game, deepen brand knowledge<sup>42</sup> and create identification. The purchase of a brand, therefore, represents certain social symbols for gamers that express the consumer's self-image. Such simulacrum<sup>43</sup> opens the space to the creation of consumer desires and is an extension of self-image.

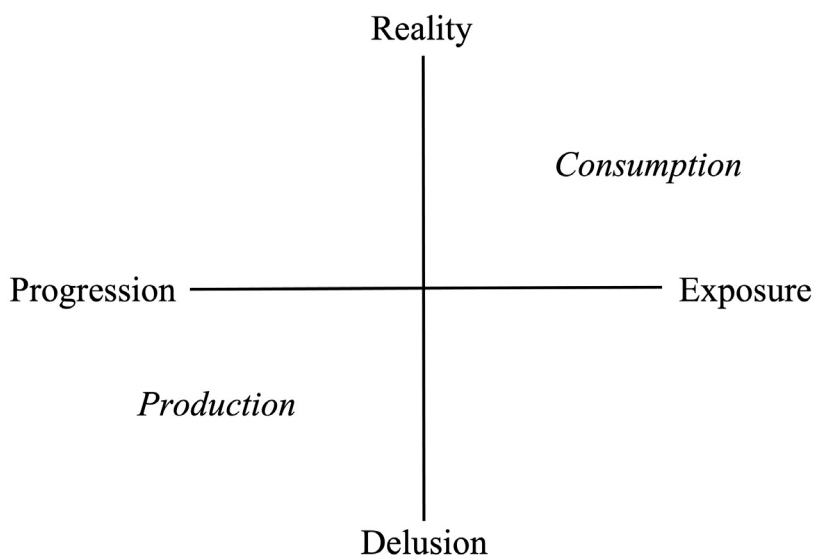


Figure 1: Brand simulation and in-game marketing

Source: own processing

Another aspect of virtual world simulation concerns the problem of manipulation that arises from the status of popular culture. First, the notion of understanding culture<sup>44</sup> through its division into elite, higher and lower, and finally, displaying culture as an open culture<sup>45</sup> that cuts across borders, raises dilemmas. If we associate culture with civilization, or equate it with art, the third aspect views culture as a plurality that multiplies cultural identities.<sup>46</sup> Games then become cultural creations of a postmodern society, and the media faces of the subject open up a place for the interpretation of the postmodern consumer. Criticism of the culture of virtual reality primarily results from the fundamental understanding of active and passive subjects<sup>47</sup> and manipulation

42 KELLER, K. L.: Building Customer-Based Brand Equity. In *Marketing Management*, 2001, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 15-17.; KELLER, K. L., APÉRIA, T., GEORGSON, M.: *Strategic Brand Management : a European perspective*. Harlow : Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2008, p. 58.

43 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2017, p. 121-129.

44 GIDDENS, A.: *Sociology*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 22.

45 EAGLETON, T.: *Culture*. London : Yale University Press, 2016, p. 15.

46 Ibidem, p. 38-52.

47 PEOVIĆ VUKOVIĆ, K.: *Medij i kultura: ideologija medija nakon decentralizacije*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2012, p. 187.

of popular culture. Accordingly, the criticisms<sup>48</sup> resent the narrative aspect of the game. The algorithm problem is a key entity in the analysis of digital game content.<sup>49</sup> Digital games are algorithmic narratives where the code determines the final performance given consumer choices. The ordinate is where we distinguish between reality and delusion (Figure 1). This is where the problem of active and passive subject arises. What does the term passive subject mean? Are the games interactive<sup>50</sup> without thinking of interactive dramas such as *Heavy Rain*<sup>51</sup>, *Beyond: Two Souls*<sup>52</sup> and *Detroit: Become Human*<sup>53</sup>? If we understand the concept of interactivity as a form of participation in the game, unlike other media, such as music or film, where the consumer is only an observer / listener, then the gamer is really active. However, if we assume from the hypothesis that the gamer is not essentially *free* but limited by algorithms, then we see that the consumer is passive here and subject to the elements of brand identity. Their self-perceptions, perceptions and impressions are closely linked to the brand image. The brand's true value lies in the consumer's thoughts,<sup>54</sup> associations, beliefs and emotions, that is, in the mindshare. From a sociological point of view, such a share in the consumer's mind is a construct of social activity.

## Game as a Brand

According to J. Huizinga's theory,<sup>55</sup> we view the game as an independent category. Therefore, if the action in the game seems insignificant, trivial or childish to us,<sup>56</sup> then it is because of the thought content of the game itself. Playing at its core is not just fun. It rests on the idea of free will and the economy of experience.<sup>57</sup> The game is opposed to reality. The opposite of the game itself is a dilemma: is the game at its core older than culture,<sup>58</sup> or is the game *folie et sens*? We perceive the concept of the game as the emergence of culture, not as a play *per se*.<sup>59</sup> The game phenomenon does not find its full interpretation in the space of need and its value does not measure its usefulness for others. The game is impossible to deny. We can deny abstraction, but we can't deny the game. The game is at its core between the opposition of the conscious and the unconscious, between reason and emotion, just like a brand. A brand is a perceptual creation of consumers. Brands are

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- 48 CLARK, N., SCOTT, P. S.: *Game Addiction: the experience and the Effect*. Jefferson, London : McFarland Company, 2009, p. 91-115.; GRIFFITHS, M. D.: Does internet and computer "addiction" exist? Some case study evidence. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 217.; KIM, J. H., LAU, C. H., CHEUK, K.-K., KAN, P.: Brief report: Predictors of heavy Internet use and associations with health-promoting and health risk behaviours among Hong Kong university students. In *Journal of Adolescents*, 2010, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 215-216.
- 49 AARSETH, E. J.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 17-23.; JUUL, J.: *Half-real: video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge : MIT Press, 2005, p. 23-54.; WARK, M.: *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 57-74.
- 50 AARSETH, E. J.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 51-58.
- 51 QUANTIC DREAM: *Heavy Rain*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2010.
- 52 QUANTIC DREAM: *Beyond: Two Souls*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2013.
- 53 QUANTIC DREAM: *Detroit: Become Human*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.
- 54 ARVIDSSON, A.: *The Logic of the brand*. Milano : Università degli Studi di Milano, quaderno 36, 2007, p. 7-11.
- 55 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens*. Kettering : Angelico Press, 2016, p. 11-32.
- 56 GUNTER, B.: *Kids and branding in a digital world*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 79-90.
- 57 SOLOMON, M., BAMOSSY, G., ASKEGAARD, S., HOGG, M. K.: *Consumer Behavior, European Perspective*. London : Prentice Hall, 2009, p. 38.
- 58 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens*. Kettering : Angelico Press, 2016, p. 1.
- 59 JUKIĆ, D.: Advergaming: Identity Brand Analysis in the Virtual World. In *International Journal of Marketing Science*, 2019, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 84.

much more than products: they are networks of information and prescription,<sup>60</sup> emotional and rational, playful and serious. A brand is an added value that enriches products and services. Brand value<sup>61</sup> can be reflected in how consumers react, feel, think and act with respect to the brand.<sup>62</sup> More recent studies confirm that brand experience in the virtual world has a strong influence on the world of purchasing decisions.<sup>63</sup> These virtual world brand experiences may affect a consumer's decision to purchase. Personality theory also confirms this<sup>64</sup> according to which associations in play, as versions of the narrative,<sup>65</sup> are a way into the unconscious. Consistent self-images of consumers are projected through brands that match the self-perception.

This means that if the brand image matches the consumer image, it creates a precondition for brand loyalty. In essence, consumers tend to reflect their self-image through brands.<sup>66</sup> Looking at the axis of abscissa, playing a game in which brands are exposed to consumers, when brands are on the consumer's perspective, brands influence the formation of consumer self-image and the consumer responds to marketing stimuli that allude to the consumer's images. The same is stated in consumer behaviour theory, where brand choice is viewed as an attempt to retain consonance, or avoid dissonance. In today's post-modern marketing,<sup>67</sup> the role of brand loyalty is becoming crucial. It becomes crucial to attract and retain the consumer, and it is the brand that is crucial in appealing because it reflects the promise that consumers expect. The brand is a very complex symbol. Brand positioning needs to be viewed through the full marketing mix of benefits we call the proposed brand value.<sup>68</sup> The way consumers make their purchasing decisions is not always the same.<sup>69</sup> We divide patterns of behaviour according to the degree of consumer involvement. Consumers seek and use information as part of their own rational problem solving, but their decision-making may not always be rational. Consumers choose products that are consistent with their self-image, and discard those that are inconsistent. As we view self-image in the context of personal consumer factors, we can conclude that self-image interacts. Of course, the product purchased influences the formation of the consumer image<sup>70</sup> and the above hypothesis serves as one of the roles of the consumer's impressions.

Self-image does not have to be realistic, nor are brand images an indication of the true value of the brand. This means that consumers evaluate their experiences in relation to self-image, but also in relation to brand experiences. A brand can be viewed through the context of a person,<sup>71</sup> and this approach imposes a model of studying associations. Consumers buy brands because they feel better and 'align their values'.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly,

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60 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 390.

61 KELLER, K. L., APÉRIA, T., GEORGSON, M.: *Strategic Brand Management : a European perspective*. Harlow : Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2008, p. 42-87.

62 KOTLER, P., KELLER, K. L.: *Marketing Management*. Upper Saddle River : Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006, p. 276.

63 BARNES, S., MATTSOON, J.: Brand Value in Virtual Worlds: An Axiological Approach. In *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 2008, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 200-202.; GABISCH, J. A., GWEBU, K. L.: Impact of virtual brand experience on purchase intentions the role of multichannel. In *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 2011, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 312.

64 FREUD, S.: *Die Traumdeutung. Studienausgabe Band 2*. Frankfurt am Main : Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982, p. 577.

65 FLUDERNIK, M.: *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York : Routledge, 2009, p. 21-39.

66 SCHIFFMAN, L. G., KANUK, L. L.: *Ponašanje potrošača*. Zagreb : Mate, 2004, p. 111.

67 BROWN, S.: Postmodern Marketing?. In *European Journal of Marketing*, 1993, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 22.

68 KOTLER, P., ARMSTRONG, G.: *Principles of Marketing*. Harlow : Prentice Hall, 2007, p. 231-238.

69 KHAN, M.: *Consumer Behaviour and Advertising Management*. New Delhi : New Age, 2006, p. 5.

70 FOXALL, G. R., GOLDSMITH, R. E., BROWN, S.: *Consumer Psychology for Marketing*. London : International Thomson Business Press, 1998, p. 55.

71 AAKER, J. L.: Dimensions of Brand Personality. In *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1997, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 352.

72 CONLEY, L.: *Obsessive Branding Disorder*. New York : Public Affairs, 2008, p. 76.



brand personality can be viewed from the perspective of the gaming platform<sup>73</sup> and from the perspective of the player's perception. In modern society, consumer behaviour is characterized by consumer desires that are created and need not be based on real needs. Needs are created and transformed into images that become real desires for the consumer. We present the formal characteristics of the game and the narrative structure of the brand and the consumer in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of digital games simulation in relation to the brand and the consumer

| Game Features | Brand Features    | Consumer Characteristics |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Freedom       | Brand Promise     | Unconsciousness          |
| Culture       | Brand Cult        | Affiliation              |
| Time          | Brand Service     | Loyalty                  |
| Repetition    | Brand Resonance   | Self-image               |
| Character     | Brand Personality | Identification           |

Source: own processing

As can be seen, the first and main feature of the game is the simulation of freedom. The digital game, as well as the game *per se*, is an exit from reality into the virtual world, into the only temporary sphere<sup>74</sup> with the consumer's own aspiration. We regard this aspiration as the consumer's unconscious desire, that is, in the context of the brand,<sup>75</sup> the promise the brand makes. Another feature is the culture of the game, which serves here as a post-modern conception of consumers. It is a culture that satisfies the ideals of living together,<sup>76</sup> while deleting the boundaries of traditional understanding of culture<sup>77</sup> and constituting consumer identification through cult brands that are inherent in the masses. The time category is similar to a service brand feature because it is limited by location and duration. The digital game takes place at a specific time and place, and its duration, as well as the product life cycle, can be used in the context of loyalty. This is especially emphasized in digital game upgrades, content additions, or revitalization. The replay of the game is one of the most important features of the game in general. Digital game is the ideal medium for marketing communication because once played, it remains in memory as an impression and brand association. In essence, all elements of the game's narratology form the very basis of the game. And finally, the character in the game is the protagonist and also the main character of the game itself. Its importance represents the consumer's personification; it is an archetype of subconscious prejudices, desires and preferences.<sup>78</sup> Also, it is a construct of brand personality, but also ultimately of consumer identification with the brand.

In-game marketing can influence brand information, it can increase brand awareness<sup>79</sup> and positive brand attitudes.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, gamers develop a specific form of virtual

73 PALOMBA, A.: Brand Personalities of Video Game Console. In *American Communication Journal*, 2016, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 73.  
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80 LEE, H., CHO, C.-H.: An application of brand personality to advergaming: The effect of company attributes on advergaming personality. In *Computer in Human Behaviour*, 2017, Vol. 33, No. 4, p. 242.

brand personality<sup>81</sup> that has personality dimension characteristics,<sup>82</sup> starting with emotionality towards brands in digital games. According to research,<sup>83</sup> gamers experience the brand in accordance with the dimensions of personality, identical to reality. Also, brand experience in digital games has a strong influence on purchasing decisions.<sup>84</sup> According to the theory of psychoanalysis,<sup>85</sup> we can conclude that in-game associations are a form of narrative that finds its way into the unconscious of the consumer. On a symbolic level, brands are cultural products, especially when analysed from the point of view of a cult brand<sup>86</sup> or a brand attachment construct.<sup>87</sup> Brand loyalty starts from the construct of attachment,<sup>88</sup> and includes three key features: contact with an object, an object as a refuge, and protest at separation from the object. A digital game object becomes associated with the consumer's self-image (cultural object). We emphasize that consumer illusions, in relation to brand simulation in digital games, do not stem from the fact that the consumer is subordinate because they are not aware of the virtual character of their identification. Exactly the opposite. The consumer wants to participate in the game. Their game is a struggle and a play,<sup>89</sup> and thus becomes symbolic because they communicate on the associations which are the ideal basis for brands. Therefore, brand image does not come in the form of an imaginary identification of a virtual character (archetype), but at the moment of symbolic identification that is identical to the identity prism model.<sup>90</sup> As confirmation, it is enough to remember the famous commercial for the Sony PlayStation 4, in which we play model gamers at narrative and symbolic levels with Lou Reed's song Perfect Day.

## Conclusion

In order to answer the three questions we posed in the introduction, namely the key question of brand perception in digital games, we must first accept the game industry as very important in postmodern society. It is important for several reasons. First, the digital game industry generated a record 36 billion USD and a growth rate of 19%. According to the latest ESA data,<sup>91</sup> as many as 75% of households have at least one gamer. In-game

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- 82 AAKER, J. L.: Dimensions of Brand Personality. In *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1997, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 354.
- 83 LIN, L. Y.: The relationship of consumer personality trait, brand personality and brand loyalty: An empirical study of toys and video games buyers. In *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2010, Vol. 19, No. 19, p. 13.
- 84 BARNES, S., MATSSON, J.: Brand Value in Virtual Worlds: An Axiological Approach. In *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 2008, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 204.; GABISCH, J. A., GWEBU, K. L.: Impact of virtual brand experience on purchase intentions the role of multichannel. In *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 2011, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 312-313.
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- 89 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens*. Kettering : Angelico Press, 2016, p. 19.
- 90 KAPFERER, J. N.: *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London : Kogan Page, 2008, p. 182-190.
- 91 2018 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data. *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*. 2018. [online]. [2020-11-05]. Available at: <[https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ESA\\_EssentialFacts\\_2018.pdf](https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ESA_EssentialFacts_2018.pdf)>; 2019 *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*. 2019. [online]. [2020-11-05]. Available at: <<https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Essential-Facts-About-the-Computer-and-Video-Game-Industry.pdf>>.

marketing must therefore be viewed through integrated communication of the game as a culture and society in which the game has become a very serious category.<sup>92</sup> Second, consumers want to see brands in the virtual world because they make it easier to identify and transition from the real to the virtual world. Also, digital games allow relaxation of inhibitions, which is a prerequisite for unconscious content. Consumers recognize this content at the symbolic level inherent in the sender-recipient relationship as per J. N. Kapferer.<sup>93</sup> The brand identity is on the side of progression and delusion as shown in Figure 1. The image is on the side of gamers, which we understand as the recipient of the message. From the above it follows that identity precedes image, therefore identity is understood as the desired image (message) that we send to the consumer. This means that brand identity elements in a digital game with gamers communicate at two levels: the conscious and the unconscious. The first level comprises the desired brand in games, which is a simulation of reality,<sup>94</sup> while the second level involves psychoanalysis, that is, starting with the unconscious elements referred to by S. Freud.

Consumers seek and use information as part of their own rational problem-solving. However, their decision making is not always rational. Consumers choose products that are consistent with their images of themselves, and discard those that are inconsistent. Therefore, identity can be seen as both personal and imposing.<sup>95</sup> The personal tends to be more creative, and the imposed tend to be more abstract. This means that the emotional meaning of the brand must evolve from imposed to personal. In particular, those brands that are based on the so-called imposed brand identity model implies a passive consumer, while the personal model brand identity is based on contact, which implies a closer, two-way connection. With this understanding, personal identity starts from contact, which is why a brand sign is actually designed to bridge the corporate brand from the consumer, and meanings are added to it through images and image. However the passive consumer is not the same as the passive consumer of the game. More recent research confirms that brand experience in the virtual world has a strong influence on real world purchasing decisions. These virtual world brand experiences may affect a consumer's decision to purchase. This means that if the brand image matches the consumer image, it creates the precondition for brand loyalty. Gamers develop a specific form of virtual brand personality that has characteristics of a brand personality dimension. And finally, let's answer the questions in the introduction. Digital games can be brands. They are brands, which is also confirmed by many franchises. Digital game protagonists can also be carriers of brand identity. They are an identity. A game developer is also a brand. Admittedly, the corporate brand reflects on image perception in the digital game industry and generates 43.4 billion USD in sales.

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