

**Virtual Test Drive:**  
Empowering The Experience

by  
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# Introduction

Event marketing and experiential marketing are not the same. Though often used interchangeably, event marketing is simply live people marketing at special events. Erecting a booth at a conference is an example of event marketing.

Experiential marketing allows the customer to look, touch, hold, or in other ways interact with a product or service. In event marketing, the customer watches a football game. In experiential marketing, the customer plays quarterback.

These days, experiential marketing is gaining in popularity partially because it leads to so many other powerful marketing byproducts. When one customer has a successful encounter with experiential marketing, she may then tell some friends (Word of Mouth), get them and bring them to the marketing booth (Viral), post kudos on blogs (Blog Marketing), or even talk positively about the brand in public settings (Buzz Marketing). Even when it fails to win a sale, it often evolves into other continued “free” efforts.

Getting to the intended audience is as important to experiential marketing as the creative and compelling features built into the effort. Even if there are 70,000 people at a football stadium, not all of them are going to be interested in your experiential effort. Likewise, simple logistics hinder most efforts. For example, not all 70,000 people can take a turn sitting in your Ford Explorer (weak experience), opposed to getting the chance to drive it off-road (strong experience).

Amazingly, one avenue that is incredibly supportive of experiential marketing is also one of the most overlooked. Online video gaming is a gigantic, self-actualized market that consists of both sexes, all age groups, cultures, and basically every market out there!

This paper is an exploration of the power of using experiential marketing in video games, and a new approach in which all marketers should be investing both wisely, and immediately.

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# Getting A Perspective

## Start With A Football Game

If broadcast marketing is the most zoomed-out, impersonal style of reaching an audience, experiential marketing is about as zoomed-in as it gets. On Sunday, Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, an estimated television audience of 17.3 million people watched the Dallas Cowboys take on the Carolina Panthers at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, North Carolina on NBC<sup>U</sup>. A 30 second television commercial could have reached many of these viewers, but with little or no personal connection, no control over the viewer's experience, and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Zooming in, a marketer could have tried to personally connect with people by setting up a live event at the stadium. Bank of America Stadium holds 73,298 people. Popular themes, such as a fan winning money for kicking a field goal, are only branded entertainment. Likewise, handing out branded tchotchkes doesn't provide much value to customers, and is very expensive to the marketer.



Putting the billboard on a bike doesn't enhance the experience for the consumer... it just makes your field team sweat more.

A better effort would have offered the potential for a personal, hands-on connection between customer and brand. The problem is that, logistically, being able to handle many people one on one requires tremendous resources. For example, if each person at the football game were given only ten seconds to interact with and "experience" the product, it would require about eight and a half days worth of man hours to service them.

## Bend Reality

Video games offer myriad ways to remove the problems that hamper experiential marketing to large groups. Initially, due to *timeshifting*, or the ability to offer something without regard for time, video games allow you to run your activity or experience when it's best for the customer. Most online video games play 24 hours each day, all year round.

Likewise, such real world nuisances as gravity and physics don't hamper video games. A short person at the back of a crowd might not be able to see your product, but in a video game, that same person could possibly fly or decide to grow taller. The use of many servers, additionally, means that no one area ever becomes saturated.

More over, magic wands *do exist* in video games. In the real world, if you only brought one truck for people to drive, and a lot of people attended, you'd face long lines. But in video games, you can pull out a veritable magic wand, and create as many trucks as necessary. Should the truck break down, you can reset it, change colors, and even customize options to personalize the experience for each customer. Should too many people want to drive at the same time, you can create new arenas to handle the traffic.

Creating robust experiential marketing solutions in video games is relatively inexpensive. Though not all products benefit equally from it, experiential marketing in online video games does offer an attractive price point. "Driving" a truck in a video game will never be as exciting an experience as driving one in real life, but for the size of the audience and time with which people will interact with your product or brand, it offers much more potential return than a television commercial or the naming rights for a stadium.

# Crunching Numbers

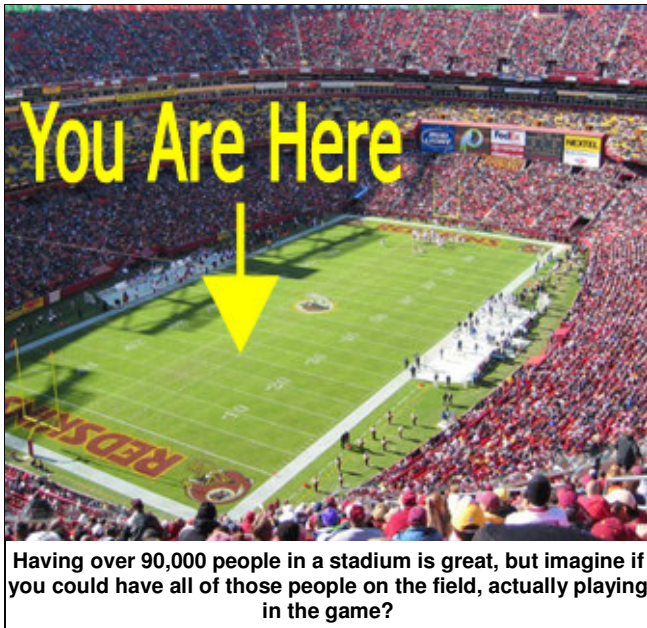
## Where The Wild Gamers Are

Online gaming is bigger than ever. The fantasy role playing game, *World of Warcraft* by Blizzard Entertainment, has between 6 million and 7 million subscribers<sup>iii</sup>. Although no study truly captures the number of people playing online games currently, even low estimates show that the number is close to 100 million<sup>iv</sup>.

Gamers are active all times of the day and night. For example, at 11am EST on Tuesday, Nov. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006, one source reported that there were about 205,000 online users playing the *Half-Life* series of games<sup>v</sup> (*Half Life*, *Half Life 2*, *Counter Strike*, etc.). At the same time, Electronic Arts' *Battlefield* series of games had over 31,500 players online, and Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age Of Camelot* game had over 10,000<sup>vi</sup>.

## Big Weekends And Low Costs

Over the weekend of Sept. 22-24, 2006, NCsoft reported that approximately 500,000 gamers had spent an average of 8.5 hours on their online game, *Guild Wars*<sup>vii</sup>. By comparison, the largest NFL stadium, FedEx Field in Maryland, has a capacity of 91,704. That means there were about four and a half times more people playing just one online game that weekend than could fit in the largest NFL stadium.



## Where The Players Are

The following table lists some of the most popular online video games in terms of current subscribers. Note that plenty of non-MMOG games, such as the *Half Life* series of games, are not listed.

Game Title	Subscribers
World of Warcraft	6,600,000
Guild Wars	2,000,000
Lineage	1,500,000
Lineage II	1,300,000
Second Life	1,000,000
Runescape	800,000
Final Fantasy XI	500,000
EverQuest	200,000
EverQuest II	175,000
Star Wars Galaxies	170,000
City of Heroes/Villains	160,000
Ultima Online	140,000
Dark Age of Camelot	125,000

Tickets in the upper level end zone<sup>viii</sup> for a game at FedEx Field go for about \$120 each, and parking is \$25. By comparison, *Guild Wars* costs about \$50, and unlike other online games, requires no monthly subscription fee.

## Even Bigger Numbers

Initially, it would seem that trying to reach Super Bowl-sized markets would be cost prohibitive. In 2006, the media cost for a mere 30 seconds of Super Bowl airtime was about \$2.7 million dollars. Add to that a potential production cost of \$1 million, as well as other expenses and agency fees, and one can see how one Super Bowl commercial can easily cost \$4 million dollars.

The initial cost of developing the NCsoft game *City of Heroes*? About \$7 million<sup>ix</sup>. The initial cost of developing Linden Lab's *Second Life*? About \$8 million<sup>x</sup>, or only about twice the price of just one Super Bowl commercial. This means that adding significant content to existing games is relatively inexpensive. Since video game audiences are in the millions, and play multiple times per week<sup>xi</sup>, reaching Super Bowl sized audience impressions through video games is relatively easy.

## Doing It Right

### Making It Fit

The biggest problem facing any marketer looking to advertise in online games is making a good fit. Gamers clearly want relevant, meaningful content. Putting a virtual Coke machine in a medieval-themed game would have an explosively negative reaction from gamers. Likewise, forcing people to sit through video commercials, especially when many of them are paying premiums to game, could create quite a problem.

The key to doing a great online gaming campaign is to create a concept that contributes to the gaming experience. It must gel with the fantasy settings of the virtual world, and enhance the game.

### Breaking The Bank

In September of 2005, Wells Fargo broke marketing stereotypes by releasing *Stagecoach Island*, an online gaming experience inside of the popular game, *Second Life*. The goal of the game was to help college-age students learn responsible savings and banking methods. Gamers were given the opportunity to skydive, sail hovercrafts, play paintball, and other exciting opportunities, all in a virtual world.

In order to take advantage of all the gaming options, students had to manage their virtual money to pay the virtual fees associated with the activities. For example, one couldn't go parachuting without a parachute, and if one wanted to sky board with a snowboard, they'd have to buy one as well. All of the virtual ATM's were, of course, operated by Wells Fargo.

### Dialing In

Companies such as Nokia and Volvo have been incorporating their products into video games for years. Gamers have been able to drive Volvo cars in *Rallisport Challenge 2* for Xbox and *Gran Turismo 4* by Sony Computer Entertainment. Combining real products with these games enhanced them because it gave gamers more cars to drive in a game about driving cars.



Claire learned how to use the camera in the virtual world, and now knows more about it than the salesman. Hopefully she learned how to haggle online, too.

### Making It Work

Great experiential marketing in video games is a subgroup of in-game advertising. If Pentax built a new mission for the game *Splinter Cell* it could be a good branding effort. A great experiential effort, however, would be if Pentax paid Ubisoft to include one of their cameras in the game, and made taking photos an important part of a spy mission. Even better, if most of the functions of the camera worked in the game, gamers who learned how to use the camera in the virtual world could then pick one up in the real world and be able to use it proficiently.

These days it's difficult to navigate through all the bells and whistles of new technical gadgets. Imagine the way gamers may actually buy products with which they are already, at least virtually, familiar.

## The Concept In Action

Below are two examples of how a company may employ experiential marketing in an online video game.

### GAME: SECOND LIFE

#### One Extreme: The Virtual Store

The *Second Life* game is already rife with 3-D stores. It is commonplace in the community for companies to establish virtual stores, complete with products unique to that company.

One way to enrich this experience is to set up virtual activities that encourage people to use these products. For example, Wilson Sporting Goods could create virtual tennis courts for gamers to use their nCode tennis racquets.

Additionally, Wilson could create other courts and play areas to feature other sporting goods, such as volleyball courts.



People in *Second Life* live very active virtual lifestyles. This beach party is fun, but could be a lot better if there were other things to do, such as beach volleyball.

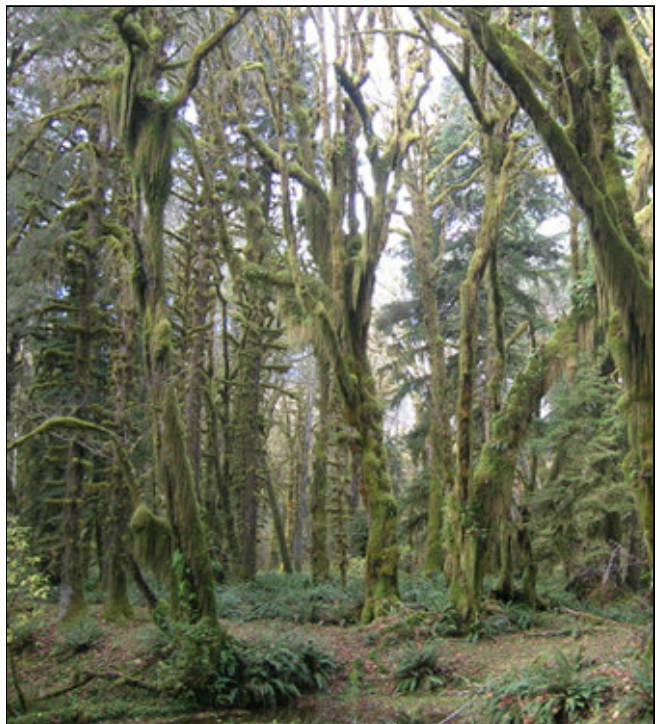
### GAME: WORLD OF WARCRAFT

#### Redefining A “Product”

Perhaps perceived as the “hardest” game in which to incorporate enriching marketing content, *World of Warcraft* is actually a great fit for many products. Obviously putting a modern technological device in “WoW” would incite a small virtual (and blog-based) riot, but one “product” that is traditionally viewed by advertisers as not “sexy” would work perfectly in the game: tourist attractions.

One client that may work well is the Washington State Tourism Office. To help promote tourism to the state of Washington, marketers could develop a new adventuring area in *World of Warcraft*. Actual real life scenic vistas and natural parks could be reproduced in detail without sacrificing the genre of the game.

To make it more exciting, game-related objects that exist in this new virtual land, such as magical fountains and meeting places, could be constructed in real life. Efforts could then be made to incorporate other tactics, such as event marketing, to have *World of Warcraft*-themed events at the physical location.



Lake Quinault in Washington State is already a magical place. Why shouldn't it fit perfectly into the magical *World of Warcraft*?

## Where To Go From Here

### Inventory Your Clients Or Products

Not every product is a clear candidate for experiential marketing in video games. This doesn't mean, however, that some effort other than experiential wouldn't work well in video games. If experiential isn't a good fit, other in-game advertising solutions may still be great options.

One step that can be taken is to list the products and clients you represent. Each could then be considered on a by-game basis. For example, one product that may not fit well in *Star Wars Galaxies* may be great in *Madden 2007*.

### Get To Know Gamers

Video gamers aren't just teenage boys. Currently, just about anybody and everybody is a gamer. The Entertainment Software Association has great research on video gamers. Web sites such as Water Cooler Games<sup>xii</sup> and Engadget: Gaming<sup>xiii</sup> are continually updated with valuable information.

Gaming web sites and fan sites are also helpful for research. Almost all video games have at least one official web site dedicated to servicing players, and most of them have many created and maintained by fans. Recently, the news agency Reuters opened up a special online group just to cover the activities happening inside of *Second Life*<sup>xiv</sup>!

### Build Your Creative Capability

You need to have the ability within your creative and strategic teams to work with experiential marketing and video games. The option of using these should be something initially considered long before the media choices are made. Set up appointments with vendors and consultants specialized in experiential marketing and video games. Let them explain to you what currently can be done, and what services they offer. By expanding their understanding of the tools at their disposal, creative teams will be able to design richer concepts.

### Bring In Some New Talent

Make some tactical hires to bolster your strategic and creative stables. The inclusion of a creative technologist can be very helpful. Art directors with



This is a screenshot of the Reuters section of *Second Life*. Yes, those people are watching full-motion video.

prior video game work bring enough mechanical experience to help everyone involved in producing an online gaming effort. Remember that clients are already asking their agencies to offer these types of services. Not making the financial investment now could become a serious, and expensive, capability problem later, never mind setting the perception that your agency can't handle that kind of work.

### Take A Shot

One full-page ad in the Boston Globe, on a random weekday, in black and white, is going to cost over \$50,000<sup>xv</sup>. One television commercial is going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. For a similar investment you can create something more personal that reaches a much wider audience, and builds relationships that will last for years. It's not that it makes sense to try an experiential marketing effort in a video game; it makes no sense not to.

Creating an experiential marketing effort in a video game is not uncharted territory. There are many consultants that can help run the process, and even more companies and agencies that can handle all stages of development and production. The thing to remember is that the door is open and marketers are rushing to take advantage of these opportunities now. Do you invest now when it's an option, or do you invest later when it's a requirement?

## About The Author



Kevin Glennon is a creative technologist who has consulted for agencies and companies for years. He writes regular articles about aspects concerning the advertising industry, especially those involving interactive and new media efforts, and is a frequent contributor to popular industry web sites and blogs such as AdRants.com.

Kevin has consulted on projects for IKEA, Royal Caribbean, Guinness, TheTruth.com, Give Us Your Poor, Boston Public Schools, and many others. He's always interested in hearing about new projects, and loves when people offer him great money to help them create and build compelling and mind-blasting programs, projects, and services.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Entertainment Software Association. "Essential Facts About The Computer And Video Game Industry." 2006.
- <sup>ii</sup> Nielsen Media Research Inc., as reported through Zap2It.com, 11/06/2006.
- <sup>iii</sup> Bruce Sterling Woodcock. "An Analysis of MMOG Subscription Growth, Version 21.0." June, 2006.
- <sup>iv</sup> This Is Local London. "Lara And Mario Star At Game On." Thisislocallondon.co.uk, 10/30/2006.  
Entertainment Software Association. *ibid.* Note that this statistic does not include Asian markets.
- <sup>v</sup> Valve Corporation's *Steampowered.com* "Steam & Game Stats" survey, 11/07/2006, 11am EST.
- <sup>vi</sup> Mythic Entertainment's "State of the Realm" section of its online publication, *The Camelot Herald*, 11/07/2006, 11am EST.
- <sup>vii</sup> NCsoft press release, 10/05/2006.
- <sup>viii</sup> Upper Level 414 vs. the Carolina Panthers, 11/26/2006, according to [www.stubhub.com](http://www.stubhub.com).
- <sup>ix</sup> Quentin Hardy. "Ordinary Hero." as published on [Forbes.com](http://Forbes.com), 10/04/2004.
- <sup>x</sup> Larry Greenemeier. "Open Doors To Innovation." as published on [InformationWeek.com](http://InformationWeek.com), 10/17/2005.
- <sup>xi</sup> Entertainment Software Association. *ibid.*
- <sup>xii</sup> The URL for Water Cooler Games is [www.watercoolergames.org](http://www.watercoolergames.org)
- <sup>xiii</sup> The URL for Engadget: Games is [gaming.engadget.com](http://gaming.engadget.com)
- <sup>xiv</sup> Eric Auchard and Kenneth Li. "Reuters Opens Virtual News Bureau In Second Life." Published on [USAToday.com](http://USAToday.com), 10/16/2006
- <sup>xv</sup> "Boston Globe National DMA Rates," from [Boston.com](http://Boston.com). Calculated for black & white daily run rate (\$577/column inch) at 90.25 column inches.