In-Game Billboards Go Interactive

Funcom and Massive Inc. give Anarchy Online players the option of interacting with ads in the online game's world

Last week, Funcom and Massive announced a new sort of billboard ad in Anarchy Online. Called "interactive advertisement technology" this new feature will allow players to do more than just passively look at an ad. Instead, players can interact with the ad and see a more detailed model of the Toyota Yaris, for example.

Massive Incorporated CEO Mitch Davis commented at the time that this was "a tremendous step forward in terms of giving advertisers what they want- the ability to target the elusive male 18-34 range and allowing them to interact with the products for a more memorable experience," and added, "This is just the beginning of interactive ads in games."

But what does it mean for advertisers? And how will...
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But how do they respond to it?

Now, with these sorts of interactive ads, one might think that the potential for alienation would be high. However, the response to these ads has been very positive, according to Perkins and Longano.

"The reaction to the Toyota ads was very positive and our players seem quite happy to be given an alternative to the normal subscription method!" said Perkins. "The interactivity will allow for some creative things to happen that have not been possible before. We utilize the billboards not only for paid ads but for fictional in-game ads and this opens up the doorway to allow for interaction with this content as well. This is the beginning of a new revolution in in game advertising and it will be fascinating to watch how it evolves and what creative things we can bring to the table."

"We're always looking at new inventory elements, new ideas that will help advertisers push their ads further and also for gamers as well," said Longano. "Take for example, a barrel you can smash it and and get gold. It's part of the interactive experience that makes a game. With interactive ads, we asked gamers about it and about 80% said, "Yeah, if we can interact and it's interesting, we'll go for it. The number of gamers that will click on the ad and interact with it is immense. If you want to know more about it, just click and you can find out."

"Before we put the ads out, we make sure that they appeal," he added. "We don't leave anything to risk or chance, we test with groups to see how they react. It's your choice; you determine whether or not you're going to click on it. That's what gamers want, they want choice. There's no pop-up associated and it doesn't take you out of the game. We try to be respectful and mindful of the game experience."

And how is it measured?

The sort of advertising worth for these kinds of ads is immense. With most in-game ads, stats show how the player sees the ads (i.e. from what angle and for how long). Now, however, it can be seen who is interacting with the ads and how many times they've clicked on it.

"Massive Inc. has technology to track the number of unique views and geographic location of viewers," explained Perkins. "Views are not measured in the traditional sense, but instead only counted when the player has been exposed to an ad from a certain view and distance for a set amount of time. (Wouldn't it be great if the same was true with television, radio and print ad buys?) The ads are geo targeted and it is quite interesting that a group of players from different countries can be viewing a billboard at the same time but be seeing different ads. The system does not utilize 'cookies' or gather any privacy act data from players. Beyond the IP addresses to target the ads correctly there is no customer data released outside of Funcom at all. Surveys have shown the ads to be extremely effective in terms of brand recall. This makes it extremely appealing to advertisers and certainly allows the players to benefit by allowing us to offset high development costs to bring them ongoing new content."

"There's the basic metrics we already have," Longano mentioned. "We can check out the amount of interaction on an aggregated scale, so advertisers can see what % are interacting, and that's what advertisers want to see. It can be
compared to the Internet or anywhere there's interactive medium."

**What will come of it?**

Chances are, this is only the tip of the iceberg with interactive in-game ads. Likely, all sorts of different corporations are looking to get in on this new sort of dynamic advertising currently utilized in *Anarchy Online*. At the same time, publishers and developers will always be looking for new possibilities with these interactive billboards, and beyond to new ad technology.

"This was only revealed in the last several days, but I understand from Massive Incorporated that there is a high level of interest from the same range of top advertisers as we have for the traditional dynamic ads (beverage companies, movies, software companies, food chains, cell phone providers etc)," said Perkins. "Both the dynamic ads and the ‘video’ ads have been received very well by advertisers and it is a challenge to keep up with the increasing demand. This has been a wonderful win-win situation for all sides, but most importantly for the players."

"We’re constantly working with Massive to improve what we can offer the players and advertisers but I can’t reveal what’s being investigated at this time other than to say we were the first to integrate the dynamic ads into an MMO, the first to introduce video ads and the first to go with interactive ads in this manner," she continued. "We are lucky to have a crew that is willing to be innovative and we’re always working on new technologies and new ways to implement those technologies. This has been a very good synergy where both companies are eager to push boundaries. We will continue to expand what we can offer to bring visual and audio sensory experiences into *Anarchy Online* in ways that were not possible previously. I’m sorry I can’t be more specific there right now, but more information will be forthcoming in the near future."

"We’re always looking to evolve the way ads are used," said Longano. "We want things to be done contextually to a game and we’re always looking for new ways to do things [with] creativity. In the future, you’re going to see more types of interactions. When we have lead times of 12 to 18 months, you’ll start to see ads written into the game and work with the gameplay experience. Again, it all has to make sense, lend itself to it contextually."

"As we’ve integrated titles today into our network, we’re looking into different things. At the end of the day, it’s up to the developers and publishers. Eventually, advertisers are actually tailoring and actually creating the ads for game. Hopefully the dollars will go back to the developers so they can continue to make good games," he concluded.

By David Radd

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