Chapter 10
Follow the Children! Advergames and the Enactment of Children's Consumer Identity

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Contents

Isolde Sprenkels is a PhD researcher with the ERC funded DigIDeas project: Social and Ethical Aspects of Digital Identities. Towards a Value Sensitive Identity Management. This chapter is part of Isolde Sprenkel's dissertation. It features not only a study of multidisciplinary literature on children, advertising, new media and consumption, but it also has its base in the empirical research conducted for the aforementioned research project such as interviews with Dutch market practitioners and observations at marketing conferences.Irma van der Ploeg is an Associate Professor Infonomics and New Media at Zuyd University in The Netherlands, and principal investigator with the ERC funded DigIDeas project: Social and Ethical Aspects of Digital Identities. Towards a Value Sensitive Identity Management: www.digideas.com.

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10.1 Introduction

In a society increasingly inundated with digital technology, children in the Netherlands learn from a very young age how to use new Information and Communication Technologies. These technologies offer them ways to play, learn, explore and develop their sense of identity, as well as interact and communicate with peers and adults. Using desktop, tablet, and laptop computers, smart phones, MP3 players and (handheld) video game consoles, children spend ever more time online. E-mail, messenger programmes, mobile app(lication)s, search engines, social networking websites, game portals, virtual (game) worlds and other types of websites are part of their everyday life.

Contemporary marketing strategies and advertising formats are increasingly designed with these developments in mind. Often part of a cross-media approach, market practitioners[1] employ diverse online means in order to connect with children. If they would have a credo for this, it could be 'We need to go where children are online'. Their online presence varies from banner advertisements, different forms of gamevertising, and branded social networking profiles, to viral video advertisements, brand presence within online virtual worlds, and websites aimed at children related for instance to food, beverage and toy brands or television programmes. It offers them ways to meet corporate goals, such as building brand awareness and stimulating product purchase amongst children and their parents. And it also enables them to collect valuable information about children; turning children's online playgrounds into sites for detailed surveillance.[2] This leads to a second possible credo 'What children do and care about online is worth monitoring'.

One type of game many children enjoy playing is online casual or mini-games. These short, 'free' and easy-to-learn games have friendly designs with bright colours and fun tasks to perform, and are developed to either entertain, to educate, or to deliver a particular commercial message. This chapter focuses on the latter, 'advertisement as game,' which is specially developed around a particular brand or product and is often referred to as 'advergame.'[3] We start with a preliminary analysis of a Dutch advergame, illustrating ways in which it aids in achieving a range of corporate objectives, which that go beyond advertising as such. In the sections that follow, we refer back to this, while, using insights from science and technology studies and surveillance studies, we show how the configuration of

[1] Daniel Cook defines the term market practitioners as "marketers, researchers, designers, manufacturers, and other market actors" as market practitioners; Cook 2011, p. 258.

[2] Chung and Grimes 2005; Steeves 2007.

[3] There are different understandings of what advergames are. Within this chapter we consider advergames to be online casual or mini-games specially developed around a particular brand or product. We consider them to be a particular form of gamevertising; with gamevertising in general being the promotional or advertising possibilities before, within or after an often already existing console, pc, or internet game; Hufen 2010.

advergames is part of enacting children's identities as consumers and 'media literates'. In addition, we discuss the issue of fairness of advertising and marketing to children. We show how market practitioners defend their practices by referring to images and conceptions of children as desiring and competent consumers which, we argue, are (partly) produced by the very practices they try to legitimise.

10.2 Inside an Icy Laboratory

In 2007, ice cream brand OLA and children's television channel Nickelodeon started the 'OLA Water Games'[4] campaign.[5] OLA was a sponsor of the Dutch Olympic Committee at the time, and felt inspired by the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Moreover, swimming was very popular as an Olympic sport among children, and many children associate the swimming pool with ice cream. Thus, OLA figured it had found a solid basis for a new campaign. Competition days were organised in swimming pools in the Netherlands, allowing children to play games based on Olympic sports and branded by OLA ice cream. Children were offered OLA (inflatable) water fun products as rewards, in order to stimulate children to exercise and play together, and of course, to enlarge the market share of OLA. With this campaign OLA tried to generate a positive brand image among children, connecting itself with sports and exercising, creating a healthy image for a product which normally isn't associated with a healthy lifestyle. Multiple channels were used to promote the OLA Water Games. For instance, the ice cream wrappings contained stamps called 'heartbeats', which could be saved for the inflatable water fun products used at the competition days. This campaign was also promoted in online parental communities. Nickelodeon reported on the Water Games during one of its best viewed shows named SuperNick, and a special OLA Water Games website was built with information about the competition days. In 2008, OLA added a gaming section to this website which immediately attracted many more visitors; in 2007, the site counted 156,000 unique visitors, in 2008, after adding the gaming section, 250,000 visitors were counted.[6]

The gaming section on the OLA Water Games website was considered a great success and OLA and Nickelodeon decided to build on this. As the Beijing Olympics were in the past, and OLA no longer a sponsor for the Dutch Olympic Committee, they decided to use associations children would have with OLA ice

[4] In Dutch: OLA 'Water Spelen'.

[5] OLA is the name under which the 'Heartbrand' operates in the Netherlands. The ice cream brand with the double lined red heart-shaped logo, is one of the food brands offered by multinational consumer goods company Unilever. Nickelodeon is a market-leading television channel for children, owned by Viacom International Media Networks Northern Europe.

[6] De Goeij and Kwantes 2009.

cream as a starting point for a new multimedia campaign in 2009 called OLA Ice Age,[7] with the specially designed gaming world www.olaijstijd.nl[8] at its centre. At Nickelodeon's Kids Insights day, a conference on 'kids marketing' trends in the same year, an OLA marketing manager gave a presentation on children's associations with ice, entitled 'the world of ice according to kids'. The presentation was illustrated with several pictures and drawings of ice caves, laughing children eating ice cream, a mammoth and a Neanderthal man.[9] Some of these associations may have been inspired by the Ice Age movies distributed by 20th Century Fox Film Corporation. OLA itself has a connection with Ice Age too, as they have promoted the Ice Age 3 movie on their product wrappings during 2009.[10] These associations were employed in the campaign, used as a starting point for the design of the gaming world OLA Ice Age, in order to appeal to children.

The leading role in the scenario for the OLA Ice Age campaign is taken by Professor Freeze,[11] playing the part of the ice cream professor and inventor of OLA ice cream. Professor Freeze is "taking children on an adventure and guides them through the games and activities on the website".[12] This fits Nickelodeon's self definition of being a 'crazy mentor'. In their brochure informing potential advertisers they explain that Nickelodeon is like a crazy mentor, taking children on an adventure within a secure and trusted environment, and bringing them back home safely afterwards.[13] Professor Freeze, the character representing the OLA brand,[14] is just like Nickelodeon presented as a mentor, a role model, someone to trust. Inviting children to engage in a trust relationship with a brand is a strategy used in marketing targeted at children. The concept of 'mentorship' is rooted in antiquity: it was Odysseus the father who placed his wise friend and trusted advisor Mentor in charge of his son Telemachus when he left for his years of wandering, his Odyssey. In OLA Ice Age, however, it is Professor Freeze, representing OLA, who pronounces himself mentor to children. Thus, children are encouraged to trust brands, consider them their mentors and friends, or, as Valerie Steeves argues: "as role models for the child to emulate, in effect embedding the product right into a child's identity".[15]

Professor Freeze's friends are living with him in his ice cave. Among these are a little woolly mammoth and a big Neanderthal man, at first sight playing no

[7] In Dutch 'OLA IJstijd'.

[8] The Dutch website is offline at time of finishing this chapter. Though the Belgian one is similar and online: www.olakids.be.

[9] Houben 2009.

[10] OLA 2009.

[11] Professor 'De Vries' in Dutch, which is actually a very common name in the Netherlands.

[12] OLAIJstijd 2010.

[13] MTV Networks 2009.

[14] Entertaining (cartoon) characters are often used in marketing campaigns to help sell a product, service or brand. Think of the Ronald McDonald character selling the McDonalds brand; Calvert 2008.

[15] Steeves 2006.

particular part at all, besides being considered part of children's associations with 'ice' and 'ice cream' perhaps.[16] At night, Professor Freeze drives around in his ice cream van to copy children's dreams. Back at his ice cave, he turns these dreams into ice cream by using his ice cream machine. When entering the website, an animation is showing Professor Freeze packing his bags, announcing that he is going on a vacation and in need of an assistant to operate the ice machine. Different badges can be earned on the website by playing games and quizzes, related to existing ice creams in OLA's assortment. Encouraging children to play with particular products enables them at a later point in time to identify the brand.[17] Other activities are earning badges and designing one's ultimate fantasy ice cream. When a child has earned all badges, he or she can become the assistant that professor Freeze is looking for. By ascribing a particular role to a child this way, a personal relationship with the brand is created.[18] This is a common strategy within advergames: children can, for example, become 'assistants', 'heroic riders' (www.raveleijn.nl) or 'arts and crafts champions' (www.knutselwereld.nl). They are asked to help out, are challenged, and offered a particular role to play.

Another feature of OLA Ice Age that illustrates this creation of a personal relationship is decorating "one's own room" by choosing particular colours for the elements in it. It is one of the first things a child is invited to do. A picture of this 'room' can be sent to friends, which allows OLA Ice Age to invite other children to the OLA Ice Age website. This is a form of viral marketing in which children are encouraged to share their experience and communicate with others about OLA. Friends receive a message such as "do you want to decorate your own room in the OLA Ice Age cave and play cool games? Go to…". Sharing one's gaming experience with others offers the possibility to collect personally identifiable information.[19] An arts and crafts competition can be entered here as well. In this competition children are asked to draw or glue together their own ice cream, take a picture of it and upload it to the website. Also, a competition was organised for which children were encouraged to buy a particular popsicle containing a code on its stick, required to enter into the competition. Such direct encouragement to product purchase is also a common strategy in advergames.[20] Within the ice cave, there are several games to play, wallpapers and ringtones to download, quizzes to enter and videos to watch. The videos contain the OLA Ice Age commercial and a realistic video about how ice cream is actually made, wrapped and transported to stores. Children can also upload their pictures or make a screenshot in order to 'shrek' themselves; colouring themselves green, adding 'ogor' ears and mouths, etc. And as OLA Ice Age contains multiple game levels, public displays of high

[16] OLA 2009.

[17] Grimes and Shade 2005.

[18] Steeves 2006.

[19] Gurău 2008.

[20] Moore 2004.

scores, and new games added on a regular basis, contact time with the brand is prolonged continuously.[21]

As the above illustrates, advergames are designed in such a way that they offer a brand the opportunity to reach a range of corporate goals, such as building brand awareness, creating a personal relationship with a brand, and stimulating product purchasing and consumption. There are other studies that illustrate the relationship between (adver)game design and reaching particular corporate goals, and although some of these studies have been conducted among adults, similarities are striking. Călin Gurău shows that there is a relationship between the capacity of the advergame to induce a state of flow, a mental state of subjective absorption within an activity, and a change in the buying behaviour of (adult) players.[22] This study shows similarities with research conducted by Natasha Dow Schull, demonstrating the connection between game design elements manipulating one's sense of space and time and the state of subjective absorption in play accelerating the extraction of money from players.[23] Advergame research also shows how some of these games include product-related polls or quizzes, offering valuable information for market research on children's habits and preferences.[24] As in OLA Ice Age, they may also encourage players to register and share their gaming experience with friends or family, thus enabling the collection of personally identifiable information.[25] Combined with an analysis of in-game-behaviour and activities, marketers are able to construct detailed consumer profiles, based on the aggregation of these behavioural data with demographic data.[26] Therefore, advergames can be described as Schull's "electronic surveillance devices",[27] as they enable tracking children's activities and whereabouts.

Notably, the OLA website contains no clear statement of these marketing purposes to either children or their parents. As the 'parents' section' on the website mentions, the goal is to "entertain children, stimulate their imagination and discover the world behind OLA ice cream". "Ice cream is not to be sold on the website, as it is only a fun world for children".[28] However, beyond a fun world for children, commercial ends are served as well. From plain advertising and getting children and their parents to buy a product or use a service, influencing their attitude towards a brand, to prolonging contact time with the brand, driving traffic to (brand)websites, automatically generating personally identifiable data, and building and expanding digital profiles of consumers using data mining and profiling techniques. While Professor Freeze grants children a warm welcome in his

[21] Moore 2004.

[22] Gurău 2008.

[23] Dow Schull 2005.

[24] Moore 2004; Grimes 2008.

[25] Gurău 2008.

[26] Grimes 2008; Chung and Grimes 2005.

[27] Dow Schull 2005.

[28] OLAIJstijd 2010.

ice cream laboratory, guiding them on a playful, and informative journey to become his assistant, in the background a business is running of which children have no clue.

Attempts to evaluate contemporary forms of marketing communication, especially those to children, from an ethical or moral point of view are rooted in a history of studying and questioning the fairness of advertising. Although discussed widely, a clear definition of the concept of fairness itself tends to be hard to find. Nonetheless, in what follows, we briefly summarise the main points made in this body of work, which, as Sonia Livingstone explains, merges "a philosophical question about ethics (is it fair to persuade those who are unaware of such efforts?) with an empirical question about influence (who is particularly susceptible to persuasive messages?)".[29] We then describe how market practitioners tend to respond to such ethical challenges with strategies and marketing research of their own, in an attempt to deflect moral criticism.

10.3 The Fun and Fairness of Advergames

10.3.1 Shaping Vulnerability

Assessing the fairness of advertising to children is usually based on certain presumed cognitive capacities of children, or lack thereof. Underlying this, and frequently referred to, is an age-stage evolution model of children's cognitive development from developmental cognitive psychology.[30] This model posits several developmental 'milestones',[31] the first of which is reached when a child is around 2 or 3 years old. This is the moment when a child is considered to be capable of distinguishing advertising from other media content. The moment a child can understand the selling and persuasive intent behind an advertisement, at around 8 years old, is considered to be the second milestone.[32] The third and final milestone is reached somewhere around age twelve, when a child is presumed to have acquired the ability to reflect on, weigh and refuse an advertisement.

The canonical argument about the fairness of advertising to children refers to this model, and states that those marketing campaigns can be considered 'fair' that respect the different levels of competency to understand techniques of persuasion. It can be dissected in three parts.[33] First, a literacy argument, which applies to

[29] Livingstone 2009a, p. 170.

[30] Nairn and Fine 2008.

[31] Lunt and Livingstone 2012, p. 147.

[32] Although, as David Buckingham explains, some studies suggest that this understanding is not necessarily used. He claims differences in these estimations are a consequence of research method; Buckingham 2009.

[33] Livingstone 2009a.

children until somewhere between 8 and 12 years of age and considers them unable to understand the persuasive and selling intent of advertising. Second, an influence argument, which claims that children in particular are susceptible to advertising since they lack adequate cognitive defences. And third, a fairness argument, which considers children to be both vulnerable and unable to defend themselves.

Several difficulties exist when using the above model as an ethical yardstick for assessing the fairness of advertising to children. For instance, by following this argument it is generally taken for granted that "those whose literacy is lower are assumed to be more susceptible to effects".[34] And, that "an increase in media or advertising literacy is assumed to reduce susceptibility to media effects".[35] Sonia Livingstone and Ellen Helsper found little empirical evidence for this claim. They argue that although teenagers are presumed to be more 'media literate', that does not mean that they are influenced less by advertising than younger children. They conclude that "different processes of persuasion are effective at different ages, precisely because literacy levels vary by age".[36] Which means that younger children, being less media literate, are merely persuaded differently than teenagers. Younger children tend to be persuaded by superficial or peripheral features of advertising, such as jingles and colourful and funny images, whereas teenagers tend to be persuaded by, for instance, strong arguments and references to peer-group approval.[37] Similarly, Elizabeth Moore found that 11–12 year olds were more susceptible to the entertainment provided by advertising and more likely to allow it to shape their interpretation for product use than younger children, even though their understanding, their 'literacy', was much richer and broader than the understanding of 7–8 year olds.[38]

Another difficulty has to do with contemporary advertising formats. Livingstone concludes that the age-stage evolution model of children's cognitive capabilities does not fit the diversity of the twenty-first century media environment anymore.[39] She claims that the idea of milestones related to age is not convincing, "both because there is no universal relation between understanding and age, and because persuasion occurs, in one way or another, across the range".[40] In saying this, she follows Agnes Nairn and Cordelia Fine, who doubt the possibility to establish any 'magical age' at which children are supposed to understand and resist persuasion,

[34] Advertising effects can be intended by advertisers, such as brand awareness and buying intent, and non-intended, such as materialism and family conflicts; Valkenburg 2002, p. 140. In this chapter we call intended effects by advertisers 'goals'.

[35] Livingstone and Helsper 2006.

[36] Livingstone and Helsper 2006.

[37] Here Livingstone and Helsper are inspired by Petty & Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion which distinguishes two routes of persuasion, a central one and the peripheral one; Livingstone and Helsper 2006.

[38] Moore 2004.

[39] Livingstone 2009a.

[40] Livingstone 2009a, p. 172.

as contemporary advertising formats often intentionally bypass children's explicit persuasion knowledge and instead persuade implicitly.[41] These formats tend to be more covert, by being integrated in non-commercial contexts, for example, which challenges not only younger and older children's cognitive defences, but those of teenagers and even adults as well.[42]

A theory on consumer behaviour that is well known among market practitioners is based on the 'persuasion knowledge model' developed by Friestad and Wright.[43] According to this model, consumers' knowledge of persuasion, marketing and advertising tactics influences the way they deal with attempts of persuasion. This means that when the persuasive intent behind a commercial message is recognised, people will deal with the message differently than when they do not recognise this intent. When they recognise the intent, they will change their attitude and will tend to resist the commercial message itself. We will leave aside whether this model is adequate or not. What is interesting is that it implies that by eliminating recognition of a commercial message market practitioners are more likely to succeed. This makes advergames an excellent tool for persuasion, marketing and advertising tactics, since the recognition of a commercial message is eliminated, and play and fun are probably the first and only thing children associate advergames with. Market practitioners tailor messages, design products, packages, websites, campaigns and advertisements in such a way that they appeal to children.[44] While advergames may be seen as an opportunity to play and have fun for free, children remain unaware of the commercial intent and goals behind the advergame. Market practitioners adapt online gaming technology, a technology generally understood and recognised by children as enabling play and fun, to serve quite different purposes. They appropriate and adapt this technology in such a way that it serves their needs for generating valuable consumer information, and for building a personal relationship between the brand they represent and a child playing the advergame.

When it comes to assessing fairness of marketing to children, Livingstone proposes a more explicit question: "Who can resist which type of persuasion under what circumstances?"[45] Framing the question this way addresses both difficulties mentioned. It leaves room for "multiple forms of vulnerability", as vulnerability depends on both an individual's cognitive/social resources and the (social or mediated) environment.[46] We want to expand on this emphasis on 'the environment' because it acknowledges that being able to recognise, understand and cope with advertising formats and tactics should not just be considered a function of the

[41] Nairn and Fine 2008.

[42] Fielder et al. 2007; Moore 2004; Nairn and Fine 2008.

[43] Friestad and Wright 1994.

[44] Cook 2011.

[45] Livingstone 2009a, p. 172.

[46] Livingstone 2009a.

individual child's cognitive/social resources.[47] An exclusive focus on skills and competences implies a rather instrumental view of technology, considering it to be inherently neutral, becoming 'good' or 'bad' dependent on, in this case, the literacy level of its user. Alternatively, we endorse Actor Network Theory's tenet that human and non-human actors ('the social' and 'the material') should be treated symmetrically.[48] We therefore propose to consider 'the fairness issue' as something that is also very much a function of the socio-material set of relations in which children's options, choices, and chances to resist are shaped, by the advertising tactics and formats.

In support of this line of reasoning, Livingstone has shown that the design of Internet environments can actually shape and limit media literacy.[49] 'Failing' to engage in such an environment, to 'read it correctly', is not just caused by a lack of competences or skills of an Internet user. One should also consider internet environments themselves and the ways in which they allow the user to 'read' these environments. Here she refers to the work of Steve Woolgar and the notion of 'technology-as-text'.[50] Woolgar's use of the metaphor of 'machine-as-text' is part of a semiotic approach to user-technology relations. It was introduced by Actor Network Theory scholars who have "extended semiotics – the study of how meanings are built – from signs to things".[51]

We consider a semiotic approach to user-technology relations to be very useful. In a similar type of reasoning, we follow a take proposed by Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour.[52] In their technology-as-text approach, technology is seen as a particular type of text; a film 'script',[53] within which both designers and users are inscribed as active agents in the shaping of a technology.[54] We propose to consider advergames as scripts, diverting correct recognition as commercial text. We stress that we can only see what this text does, the effects it produces in itself, we can't

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[47] Nairn and Fine 2008; Rozendaal et al. 2011.

[48] The analytic symmetry between the social and material, between humans and non-humans, actors within and constituting networks, is part of a research approach or method called Actor Network Theory (ANT), originally developed by Bruno Latour (Latour 1987, 1991) and Michel Callon (Callon 1986). The title of this chapter refers to the ANT dictum to 'follow the actors' as well, describing and following any actor expressing itself when describing a network or relations.

[49] Livingstone 2009b, p. 195.

[50] Steve Woolgar "suggested that how users 'read' machines are constrained because the design and the production of machines entails a process of configuring the user" (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005, p. 8), which means that both user and possible actions of the user are constructed in the design process.

[51] Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005, p. 7.

[52] Akrich and Latour 1992.

[53] Their notion of 'script' has its origins in ANT which is described in footnote 5. "Like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action together with the space of actors and the space in which they are supposed to act"; Akrich 1992, p. 208. "Technical objects participate in building heterogeneous networks that bring together actants of all types and sizes, whether humans of nonhumans"; Akrich 1992, p. 206.

[54] Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005.

say anything about the intentions behind it. Despite the careful avoidance of attributing intention here, there are some hints that suggest that some effects might not be entirely accidental. A comment from game advertising expert David Edery illustrates this for the general field of gamevertising. He states that "the whole point is to eliminate recognition".[55] As we have shown in the previous section on OLA Ice Age, this clever design consists of a putting 'reading clues' about fun and play in the foreground, while remaining silent on processes, activities and intentions in the background. This way, the 'script' of an advergame is written in such a way that it is likely to prevent children from identifying, understanding, and coping with the commercial message and its persuasive intent. In addition, it renders other marketing practices enabled by the digital networked character of advergames invisible. This leads us to consider advergames not just as 'advertisements as games', but as part of an implicit and broader marketing strategy. Children's vulnerabilities/literacies can be considered to be shaped by both children's cognitive/social resources and these cleverly designed 'texts'. We argue that the 'fairness issues' related to advergames cannot be adequately dealt with without considering the interplay of design, strategies, practices, knowledge, human and non-human actors within a network of relations configuring these contemporary marketing formats.

10.3.2 Legitimising Marketing While Shaping Play and Fun

Not only critics, but market practitioners themselves, too, address the question of fairness of advertising and marketing to children from time to time. However, they tend to deal with the issue by invoking images and conceptions of children as desiring consumers, as competent social actors.[56] There appears to be an assumption that it is perfectly legitimate to target children as long as this is based on and provides "what children want". Thus, the more they attempt to know what children think, want, and need, the better they will be able to provide this, and hence, the less reprehensible it is to use sophisticated marketing strategies on them. The 'knowledge' about children required for this, the 'listening' to their wants and needs, comes from their own marketing research[57] focused on children, i.e. (partly) from the very marketing practices in need of legitimisation. Daniel Cook describes this knowledge as 'commercial epistemologies of children's consumption'.[58] He discusses how knowledge derives in and from marketing

[55] Edery 2009.

[56] Cook 2011.

[57] Isolde Sprenkels analyse the way in which market practitioners' research methods can be understood in a performative manner in her forthcoming dissertation, i.e. their research methods do not just represent a reality out there, but constitute or perform reality into being; Law 2009.

[58] Cook 2011.

practice, how practices and discourses enact these epistemologies. We would like to take Cook's work a step further, and claim that contemporary marketers' constitution of children's preferences and identities as consumers, are actually socio-technical enactments enabled by the very marketing practices and research techniques under discussion. To then use children's identities as consumers as legitimisation of these same practices is circular, and one might argue, rather self-serving.

To a certain extent, market practitioners are also informed by academic research on children and their psychological and cognitive development, as mentioned in the previous section. However, they appear to do so rather selectively, as this academic discourse on children and advertising appears to have evolved, partly letting go the canonical argument mentioned earlier. Market practitioners, in contrast, seem to hang on to the age-stage evolution model in relation to advertising. Based on this model, they have put together codes of conduct. For instance the Dutch Advertising Code and its special section on children and advertising,[59] proposes to help children to differentiate content as it prescribes that the distinction between advertising and editorial content should always be made recognisable. For instance, television commercials are preferably clustered and banner and pop-up advertisements on the internet should be labelled with the word 'advertisement'. However, as mentioned above, when it comes to contemporary formats such as advergames, this Code is not honoured because the distinction is not made explicit in any way at all.[60] Not only do such 'seamless environments'[61] fail to honour the Code, this form of self-regulation advocates a strategy that runs exactly counter to what advergames are about, namely presenting advertisements as game. According to the code, market practitioners have agreed upon making advertisements recognisably distinct from other content. Advergames' design, as we have seen, obliterates this distinction, precisely because they are much more than plain advertisements, having corporate goals far beyond that.

The contemporary marketing practices described in this chapter are actually instrumental in creating children's 'interests', 'preferences' and 'choices', from which their identity as savvy consumers is construed, and subsequently are referred to in order to legitimise these very same practices. In other words, market practitioners are legitimising their actions by invoking 'contemporary realities' they have done their best to create themselves. Contemporary formats such as peer-to-peer marketing and viral marketing are, for instance, considered to be "all about empowerment – about children registering their needs, finding their voices, building their self-esteem, defining their own values and developing independence and autonomy".[62] Rather than being critically assessed in relation to the Code of

[59] Nederlandse Reclame Code.

[60] Fielder et al. 2007.

[61] Moore 2004.

[62] Buckingham 2007.

Conduct, these formats are reiterating the image of contemporary children turning into desiring, competent consumers by the age of 12. Together with uncritically accepting a discourse of digital natives, (which also has been strongly debunked by academics for some time now[63]), this can be considered quite problematic. Viewed this way, children do not need much protection, as they are assumed to be skilled consumers in the making, blossoming when sensitised with various forms of marketing and advertising practices.

10.4 Conclusion

During a presentation at the 2009 Brands and Games summit about the campaigns mentioned in this chapter, representatives from OLA and Nickelodeon claimed that "fun is very important, and if the brand is well integrated it doesn't matter to children that they are actually watching advertising".[64] As we have explained, children are not 'actually watching advertising', they are playing an advergame. Considering advergames to be 'advertisements as game', moves the far-reaching marketing practice and corporate objectives informing advergames further into the background. They are not only about plain advertising, about persuading people to buy a product, using a particular service, changing peoples' behaviour and with that, about the question whether or not children are recognising a form of marketing communication as advertisement, or whether or not they are capable of understanding and actively dealing with this persuasion. They are not even only about advertisements disguised as games, as play and fun, hiding this very same commercial message. They are cleverly designed in order to reach all sorts of corporate objectives, such as building brand awareness, creating a personal relationship with a brand, collecting personally identifiable data, and stimulating product purchasing and consumption.

In a blog about the 'number one kids and youth marketing conference' in the Netherlands, a marketing practitioner claims that her industry is 'more ethical' nowadays, as it is focusing less on 'encouraging sales' and more on cases related to forms of corporate social responsibility and consumer insights,[65] 'building relationships' with children. With OLA Ice Age, we have seen how a brand creates a 'personal relationship', a relationship of trust, fun and friendship, but that this relationship is embedded in a set of less innocent techniques, processes and practices in the background. In order to build the 'relationship', a particular kind of surveillance is needed, for which contemporary formats such as advergames lend themselves well. This monitoring actually produces a different set of ethical concerns in itself. While spending time within online environments such as

[63] Helsper and Enyon 2010; Bennet et al. 2008.

[64] Reintjes 2009.

[65] Jansen 2009.

advergames, children are leaving behind various types of personal information and are strongly encouraged to share their interests, preferences and (online) activities. The information generated by such marketing practices, together with other forms of market practitioners knowledge of children, can be considered the basis of how corporations and brands get to know and understand children as their (potential) customers. Thus, in line with the characteristics of 'the personal information economy',[66] economic value is generated from children's online play.

However, our argument goes even further: it is through these very monitoring practices, and the subsequent analysis of the data generated in terms of children's 'preferences', 'choices' and 'consumer behaviour' that children are enacted as full-fledged, competent consumers; a notion that is subsequently invoked to legitimise the very practices involved in its production. By rendering children in these consumerist terms, the difference between them and adults is played down, and hence, so is the moral significance of targeting them with tactics of persuasion and seduction acceptable when used on adults. Moreover, as this allows marketers to better 'know' and 'understand' what these 'preferences' are, and they use this to better serve children's 'consumer demands', the children get what they want. Don't they?

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[66] Elmer 2004; Perri6 2005; Pridmore 2012.

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