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The use of product placement in video games: is it possible to define it as a new promising area of investments for companies and their brands? A field investigation among experts and passionate

Supervisor

Prof. Cristiano Nordio

Graduand

Beatrice Scarpa

Matriculation Number 878685

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Abstract

Crowded media environment, audience dispersion, heavy clutter and new generations' increasingly less interest in traditional media are just some examples of the elements that marketers must take into account in the main challenge they daily face: capture consumers attention.

Today we are in a situation where every purchasing decision is guided by an ever-wider set of brands and their values: they are like a close friend in our life and mind. Companies struggle to have a strong brand strategy in order to be in consumers' evaluation set and, because of the high level of media saturation, they are always looking at new advertising strategies in order to communicate and reach as many people as possible. These trends have spread the adoption of non-traditional media like social media and the various forms of branded entertainment, among which companies increasingly adopt product placement.

This is not, however, a new phenomenon: the first example of product placement dates back to the end of the 20th century, but it become widely adopted just in the 1980s.

Product placement is a method to intentionally include elements which remember the brand or its products or services in entertainment media such as television, movies, social media, music and video games. It can be included in the media mix with the aim to target large audiences.

This definition includes a media that, even if it is not a new media, has recently received increasing attention by marketers: video games. They can be played both offline, on consoles like PlayStation or on PC, or online on specific platforms. Throughout the lockdown months, as an example, there has been an increase in the hours people spend playing videogames, and this phenomenon is at the base of this dissertation. The act of including product placement in the advertising strategy seems to be a good action plan, so if product placement in movies and TV series is so effective, is it the same also for the brands inserted in video games? Is product placement in video games a new increasing investment area – to promote products or brands – for companies?

Employing videogames is an interesting way for companies to increase engagement, brand awareness and reach new segments, like millennials and generation Z. In order to build and expand the affinity with the future customers, video games offer as a plus the possibility to create a storytelling, possibility which is decreasingly available on traditional media due to their intrusiveness. Product placement in games gives also a chance to all companies of all sizes to create their own campaign, since video games provide the same probability of impact on everyone.

The final purpose of this dissertation is therefore to understand if it is possible to define video games as a new investment area. This goal has been achieved following different steps: because of a limited literature and databases where to access data, initial explorative research has been made to understand the groundwork. To be more precise, the research starts with a review of the available literature about product placement and video games in general terms with the aim to frame the situation. Then, some interviews with experts and passionate have been made in order to understand their view and opinion about the topic. Finally, the collection of data through a questionnaire distributed initially via my group of contacts, and then through the contacts of the respondents, has allowed the tracking of gamers' feelings and attitude towards product placement in video games and their brand recall.

Introduction

In a world full of media, where complexity grow day by day for both marketers and consumers, it is not possible to think that they all will continue to have the same impact forever. This is true for what is classified among the traditional media, like television, radio or billboards. Streaming platforms (where there is no commercial break) are preferred to television, podcast listen on the smartphone can substitute the radio, and billboards can be in digital form. But the assumptions just done also hold for non-traditional media, which constantly change. As an example, new generation have commuted their media consumption, they are increasingly less interest in traditional media like television, and they search for entertainment contents on online platforms and social media such as Twitch, YouTube, or online video games platforms.

These are just some of the elements that marketers must take into account every day in defining their strategy in order to capture target consumers' attention. This is why companies struggle in order to have a strong brand strategy and be in consumers' evaluation set. Since the objective of a marketing campaign is to reach as many people as possible (consistent with the strategic objective of the company), the increasing level of media saturation pushed companies to always look at new advertising strategies to include in their Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) program.

These trends are also at the base of the spread in the adoption of non-traditional media, like social media and many forms of branded entertainment, among which companies increasingly adopt product placement.

Product placement is a way to include elements which remember the brand or its products or services in entertainment media such as television, movies, social media and video games. It is an advertising method that can be included in the media mix with the aim to target large audiences as said before. However, we are not talking about a new phenomenon: one of the most remarkable examples of product placement is in the 1980s, years during which the adoption of product placement become widely adopted especially in the film industry. The example is the one of the Reese's Pieces candies in "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" by Steven Spielberg in 1982, but the first real example of product placement is attributable to Lever Brother (now Unilever), which showed its "Sunlight Soap" in many Lumiere's films around 1896.

What mainly differentiate product placement from traditional advertising methods is (most of the times) its unobtrusiveness and, as a consequence, people's attitude: they do not expect the appearing of a product or brand because their attention is focused on the entertainment element.

This is a certain advantage: since it is directly inserted in the carrying out of the media and there is no interruption, perhaps product placement is not immediately understood as an advertising campaign.

The definition cited above includes also a media that, even if also in this case it is not new, has recently received increasing attention by marketers: video games. Since the 1980s many companies have created their own video games or showed their logos in video games as a sponsor to increase brand awareness. In the first case we talk about advergame, in the latter case we instead talk about in-game advertising, which is a larger connotation for product placement. In the last years, the gaming industry has incredibly increased its value (according to a report by Accenture[1] at the end of April 2021, the sum of the direct and indirect value of the gaming industry was around $300 billion) and this should be a warning signal to marketers. Currently the aim of including product placement in video games in a company marketing strategy can includes boosting sales, but it is more focused on increasing and building the affinity with the future customers.

Among the several advantages offered to marketers by video games, there is the possibility to create an immersive storytelling[2] that with traditional media like television is decreasingly available due to the intrusiveness of their advertising spots. Another advantage is the possibility to play games both offline, on consoles like PlayStation or on PC, or online on specific platforms which, in turn, are a powerful tool where communities take shape. Throughout the lockdown months, as an example, in absence of physical contacts there has been an increase in the hours people spend playing videogames, especially online with friends.

Employing video games in their strategies is therefore an interesting way for companies to increase engagement, brand awareness and reach new segments, like millennials and generation Z. They allow to build and expand the affinity with the future customers and, finally, even if they continue to be a prerogative of large companies, flexibility of product placement offers a chance to all companies of all sizes to create their own campaign, because video games provide the same probability of impact on everyone.

Aside from this little discussion, the exceptional increase in the use of video games is at the base of this dissertation. The main question is: if product placement in movies and TV series is

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[1] Accenture, 2021 "Gaming: the next super platform"

[2] "Storytelling is the process of using fact and narrative to communicate something to your audience. Some stories are factual, and some are embellished or improvised in order to better explain the core message." (Decker, 2022 https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/storytelling)

so effective and so seems to be a good action plan for marketers and the companies they work for, is it the same also for brands inserted in video games? Is product placement in video games a new investment area – to promote products or brands – for companies?

The research, made via field investigation through a questionnaire, investigates the attitude of gamers towards product placement in video games, in order to basically understand if it is a phenomenon that is noticed or not. As a confirmation of the effectiveness of product placement, the method has been tested with almost equal question in video games and TV series. The evolution of the research is divided into four chapters.

In Chapter one I describe the methodological approach adopted in the writing of this dissertation and the structure of the questionnaire employed to collect data.

Chapter two is an introduction about product placement, its location in the marketing strategy and its origin in the literature. I then pass to a brief dual excursus: the first one historical, with reference to the evolution of the definition of product placement throughout the years, and the second one with examples coming from its various application areas.

In Chapter three I made an explanation about how, starting from games literature, we have arrived to video games understanding how the basic principles have been adapted. There is then a review of the video games market and some highlights of the various emerging trends we saw in the last years, and expect to grow in 2022.

In the last chapter, Chapter 4, I explain different opinion about product placement collected through interviews made at some experts and passionate in the video games sector, then I explicate the data about gamer's attitude towards product placement collected with the aforementioned questionnaire. Finally, I show and comment the results.

Conclusions recap the work and highlights the limits of the research, in addition to some useful points and ideas for further researches.

1. Methodological approach

I had never approached the world of video games until few months ago, when I read an article about how people have changed their video games consumption throughout the pandemic periods and the events that have taken place on online platforms also during the lockdown months. This article captured my attention: I started researching new information, and I realized I was opening Pandora's box.

Since I seldom played video games, I direct my attention to the marketing side of this media. Considering that in the same period also the consumption of movies, TV series, and in general video on demand has increased[3], I was interested in understanding the relationship that brands have with this kind of media. It is common to see brands directly inserted in the plot of a movie or TV series, but is it the same for video games? Some video games are the reproduction of a real match, like FIFA for example, and naturally they include banners and sponsors on players' t-shirt, like if we are in a real stadium. But is it possible to find products and brands also in other types of games?

I decided to focus my attention on the mix of the two mentioned topics: product placement - the insertion of products and brands in entertainment media - in video games. As soon as I started the research, I realized that I was in front of an almost new argument, since very little literature was available. For this reason, I approached the study of product placement in video games with explorative research, which allowed me to determine the research question:

> *Is it possible to define product placement in video games as a new promising area of investments for companies and their brands?*

To reach this goal, I concentrate on the consumer side of the market: I interviewed some passionate and expert in the video games field, in order to collect their points of view about the phenomenon under investigation, then I collect some data about gamers' opinion with the distribution of a questionnaire.

In the following paragraphs I will explain in detail the methodological approach and the path followed.

[3] + 73% with respect to the period before the pandemic (Borghi, 2020)

1.1. Initial explorative research

Marketing research problems, regardless of the subject, can usually be classified among three categories of research design: descriptive, causal or exploratory (Thomas, Lawal 2020; Zikmund, Babin 2007; Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020).

Descriptive research, as the name itself suggests, has the aim to "paint a picture" (Zikmund, Babin 2007) of the situation under investigation, like for example create the identikit of a certain product consumers. On the other hand, causal research is based on statistical methods, and tries to answer at a "why" question (Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020) and identify a cause-and-effect relation (Zikmund, Babin 2007). Finally, explorative research "is conducted to identify ambiguous situations or discover ideas that may be potential business opportunities" (Zikmund, Babin 2007, p. 51).

The element at the base of the decision about the kind of research to apply in a work is based on the uncertainty linked to the topic (Zikmund, Babin 2007) and the amount of available information (Thomas, Lawal 2020).

Exploratory research is usually employed in frameworks not deeply studied before (Tegan 2021) and it is involved in the early stages of a research in order to clearly define the topic, understand the situation and establish priorities (Babin, D'Alessandro, Winzar, Lowe, 2020; Thomas, Lawal 2020; Survey Monkey 2022; Zikmund, Babin 2007; Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020).

For the purpose of this dissertation, that is to say identify if it is possible to define product placement in video games as a new area of investments, exploratory research seems to be the best kind of research design for mainly two reasons. First, I approached the world of product placement, and even more the world of video games, without any past consolidated knowledge. Second, when I started looking for papers about the specific argument of product placement in video games in order to clearly define what I am talking about, I realized that the literature which encompass the study of this topic is really limited. As stated by Thomas and Lawal, exploratory research allows for an initial groundwork, which in turn will constitute the base for future researches (Survey Monkey 2022, Zikmund, Babin 2007).

As every analysis approach, also exploratory research offers to the subject several advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- Flexibility and adaptability (Survey Monkey 2022; Thomas, Lawal 2020; Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020), because it allows to changes of direction in the developing of the research.
- Low cost (Survey Monkey 2022) since it does not require expensive tools to collect data and there are no hard rules or structures to be followed.
- Insightful research, because it helps in defining the situation that, in turn, can be the ground for future researches (Survey Monkey 2022; Thomas, Lawal 2020; Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020). This, however, can also be a disadvantage since it may happen that the research come out inconclusive, but the element to remember is that it can provide useful information for the future (Survey Monkey 2022).
- It allows to understand at the begin if it worth to going on with the research or not (Survey Monkey 2022; Thomas, Lawal 2020).

Disadvantages

- Collected data are usually subjective and, as a consequence, subject to interpretation bias (Survey Monkey 2022; Thomas, Lawal 2020).
- Small sample size problem, which in turn don't allow for the generalization of data to a wide population (Survey Monkey 2022; Thomas, Lawal 2020).
- It can require a lot of labor since you are working on a new paradigm (Tegan 2021).

As regards how to develop exploratory research, there are some steps that are usually followed (Survey Monkey 2022; Zikmund, Babin 2007):

1. Identify the problem
2. Create the hypothesis
3. Define the methodology of data collection (Tegan 2021)
4. Data analysis
5. Conduct further research

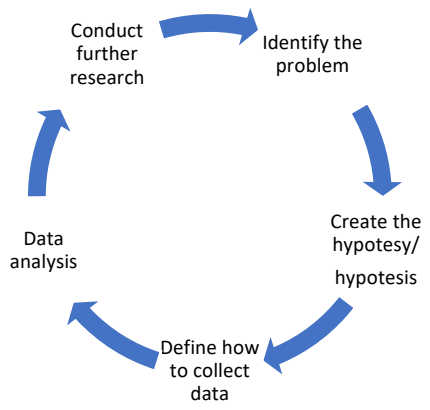

Figure 1: Steps of explorative research (Source: personal elaboration of Zikmund, Babin 2007)

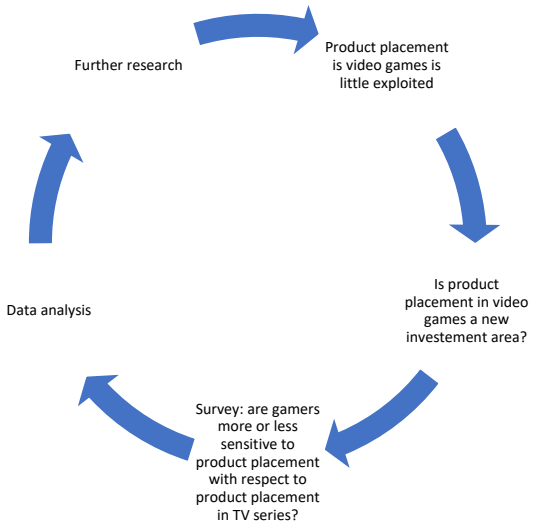

Figure 2: Steps of explorative research adapter to the topic (Source: personal elaboration)

Of the steps just listed, point three is the one which requires a little deepening.

Exploratory research usually makes use of qualitative research methods, even if some cases require the use of quantitative data collected through surveys or experiments (Survey Monkey 2022, Tegan 2021). It has been said earlier that it is an unstructured method, namely that there are no hard rules to follow in the developing of this kind of research (Survey Monkey 2022). Nevertheless, exploratory research is generally carried on by basically three kinds of techniques (Thomas, Lawal 2020; Casula, Rangarajan, Shields 2020):

1. Quantitative research, like surveys and questionnaires which are then usually processed through statistical methods;
2. Formal or informal qualitative research, usually conducted through direct conversations with the subjects of interest or semi-structured methods;
3. Mixed methods.

Chapter two and chapter three of this dissertation are the result of a literature review about product placement and games, based on secondary data gathered from previous publications, web resources (like articles on blogs and online newspapers), journals and books. They are completed by an explorative research on the specific topic of product placement in video games where, as stated before, the literature about is quite limited.

Chapter four, instead, will report the results of an informal qualitative research conducted through some interviews and a field investigation. In order to confirm or not the research question, some informal interviews among experts and passionate in the field of games have been carried out, in addition to a qualitative semi-structured questionnaire aimed to record gamers' attitude towards product placement.

1.2. Questionnaire drafting and structure

Considering that a survey is a good method to conduct a research study in order to save time and collecting data from a large audience, the validation of the research question has been investigated with some informal interviews (that will be exposed in the first paragraph of Chapter four) and a semi-structured questionnaire, whose results will be analyzed in the second paragraph of Chapter four.

Given the established fact that product placement is a consolidated and effective marketing approach, the queries of the questionnaire are written in order to collect information about people's attitude towards this kind of strategy in TV series and video games.

These two media are compared in order to, on one side, compare an emerging strategy with another already consolidated and, on the other side, to understand the wonder of gamers towards product placement. This, in turn, will help in answering at the main research question aforementioned, that is to say if it is possible to define product placement in video games as a new promising area of investment for companies and their brands. Two main interrogations are at the base of the investigation conducted through the questionnaire:

Question 1: Are gamers more or less sensitive to product placement in video games with respect to TV series viewers?

Question 2: Do gamers remember and pay more or less attention to the products/brands they see in video games with respect to TV series viewers?

To collect exhaustive answers at these two questions, the questionnaire is divided in two main areas:

- On one side questions are intended to understand the effectiveness of product placement in TV series;
- On another section, the same questions are proposed to video games users and passionate in order to investigate the relationship between gamers and product placement to identify their level of engagement and enthusiasm with the practice (considering that a limited literature is available). The final results will provide to companies some insights from a consumers' side, that will confirm or not the research question.

The questionnaire has been implemented with Google Forms for many reasons: it is a free tool, easy to use, it allows for direct collection of data and some initial graphs are already created.
The questionnaire was open from 4/01/2022 to 07/02/2022.
It was initially sent to 4 people in order to test it, understand the fluidity and if the questions were correctly formulated in order to have significant results. These answers were deleted from the database before the release to other people in order to not bias final data. The questionnaire has been initially distributed by private message (private contact network) and then posted on social media (personal pages on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn), and through the mailing list of Digra Italia (Italian Digital Games Research Association). In addition, all the people contacted were asked to share the questionnaire with their contacts.
As regard the structure of the questionnaire, after a brief introduction (where the theme is not immediately revealed since respondents should not start the compilation with prejudices), it is basically structured in 3 sections that, as stated before, from section two are twofold:

- The first section is a brief profiling of the people who fill the questionnaire (gender, age group, actual employment and country of origin). The last question of this section opens a crossroad: if you are a TV series passionate you will be redirect to one section, if you are a video games passionate you will be redirect to the other section.

Section two and three are therefore twofold but the two branches are basically equal. Regardless of whether the investigated media are TV series or video games, the aim of the questions inserted in these sections is the same: understand people's attitude and perception towards product placement.

- Section two is composed by four questions about respondent's habits: questions like "how many times a week do you play/watch TV series, how long you play/watch, which are your favorite games/TV series" have been posed.

- Section three starts with a brief introduction about product placement, in order to understand if the individual is aware about the method. Follow then a series of queries aimed to keep trace of the subject's memory about the placements like: "do you remember the brand, the kind of placement, the intrusiveness of it, the reaction to the video game/TV series and the brand itself after the exposure to the placement".

The complete questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

2. Product Placement – Literature Review

In order to give an exhaustive description about the application of the practice of product placement in video games, it is necessary to start from the basis: what is product placement, how it is evolved over time, and how it is included in a company marketing strategy.

2.1. A step back

To deeply understand the concept of product placement and its evolution throughout the years, it is necessary to take a step back to define what is a brand, what is marketing and the Integrated Marketing Communication (in the following we will refer to this with its abbreviation IMC).
With regard to the terms *brand* and *marketing*, we can refer to the definition of the American Marketing Association (AMA), one of the most relevant and influential voices in the field.
According to the AMA, "*A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers*"[4], and "*Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large*" (Approved 2017)[5].
The focus of this latest definition is on the *value* received by the customers, that is to say the perceived benefits of a product or service counterbalanced by the cost they have to bear for acquiring and/or consuming it (Belch, Belch, 2018).
How can marketers deliver this value? By the basic 4Ps of marketing defined by McCarthy in the 1960s and became well-known thanks to the work of Kotler (Kotler, Keller 2012): product, price, place and promotion, what is called the "Marketing Mix". Clearly, marketers need to develop market research and other kinds of tests and explorations in order to understand the best combination of elements of the marketing mix which will allow them to deliver value to the customer.
The act of creating an ongoing coordinated strategy, including several marketing promotional tools, activities and media, is what we now call *Integrated Marketing Communication* (IMC), which aims at conveying a unified image to the marketplace and to establish an effective

[4] AMA (2021), Definition on Branding

[5] AMA (2021), Definition of Marketing

optimized communication with both internal and external stakeholders (Belch, Belch, 2018; Sharma, Bumb 2020).

As stated at the beginning, the topic of this dissertation will be one of the four elements of the marketing mix: promotion. To be more precise, it will delve into the subject of *product placement*, which is a branch of promotion that a company can include in its overall marketing strategy or use it independently (Kureshi, Sood 2010; Soba, Aydin 2013).

2.2. History about Product Placement

Even if one of the first real definitions of product placement is the one by S.K. Balasubramanian in the 1990s, this is not a new technique: the author defined it as the practice of introducing in movies and television programs elements that recall the visual identity of a known brand, or the branded product itself, in order to influence the audience's future choices (Balasubramanian 1994).

According to the published literature, product placement has been existing for over a century, it is as old as the motion picture industry (Karisik, 2014) and it has always been an opportunity for producers to counterbalance production costs and, at the same time, increase promotion for their movies (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006; Hudson, Hudson 2006).

As reported by Newell, Salmon & Chang, it was Thomas Edison who launched this win-win practice at the end of the 19th Century. A direct example is a firm which bought from Edison's manufacturing division some transportation which have been put on the film's crew service (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006).

The first real example of product placement can be traced back to the original Lumière's films. To be more precise, the earliest appearance of a product in a short film was filmed in 1896, when Lever Brothers (today known as Unilever) came to an agreement with the directors to show their famous Sunlight soap (Newell, Salmon, Chang 2006; Hudson, Hudson 2006; Sharma, Bumb 2020) in the showing. The key figure in this context has been Lavanchy-Clarke, a Swiss distributor of Sunlight soap who facilitated the connection between the parties and made the practice profitable for both (Lever Brothers publicized their soap in U.K. and Lumière brothers publicized their film in Switzerland) (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006).

The mid-1890s, with the starting of movies projections, can be classified as the birth of the product placement in mass media (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006). By 1915, product placement had become a way to promote the convenience of using a certain product (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006).

The practice of showing products in films has then been regularized throughout the 1930s and revived in the 1980s (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006; Hudson, Hudson 2006; Sharma, Bumb 2020) (in between there is a sort of inactive period): these years witnessed the birth of many specialized agencies and agents which provided the moviemakers with lists of products available to be shown.

Exactly a century after the first appearance of a product in a movie, the 1980s were also the years where we can find some of the best cases of product placement. Among these there is one of the most successful examples, and maybe the one which has started this process as a real business: the introduction of Reese's candies in the movie "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial", produced and directed by Steven Spielberg in 1982 (Soba, Aydin 2013; Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006). Later in this chapter there will be a section with a brief in-depth analysis about this famous example.

As mentioned before in this paragraph, product placement has been taken into consideration by marketers and firms for more than a century, even if the exact term "product placement" was firstly used for scholar or trade purposes just in the middle 1980s (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011; Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017).

Since it is a long-time practice, how it has evolved over time, also its definition has changed accordingly.

Before the 1990s, several terms were used to identify this kind of practice, like exploitation, tie-in and tie-ups. These last two expressions were interchangeable (starting from the 1970s) to explain a "cooperative venture between a media maker and manufacturer, in which on-screen exposure of a product, offscreen endorsement by an actor, or a combination of on-screen appearances and offscreen endorsements were traded for paid advertising and unpaid promotions by the manufacturer" (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006). From this definition, it is easily understandable the exchange or barter system (Kureshi, Sood, 2010; Hudson, Hudson 2006) at the basis of the practice.

Nowadays product placement is also known as "branded entertainment" or "brand placement" (Sharma, Bumb 2020; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011; Chin, Wilson, Russo, 2012) depending if the focus is on the brand or on the product.

In 2012 Chin, Wilson and Russo have made an excursus through the available literature, and have reported in a table the most significant definitions of product placement, highlighting the common points and differences (Figure 3). Definitions span from 1987 to 2011 and, as seen before, the general framework has evolved and adapted throughout the years. According to the authors:

- Terms such as inclusion and incorporation are a common point of all the definitions (Hudson, Hudson 2006);
- The monetary side of the process is always highlighted (which links back to the barter characteristic) (Kureshi, Sood 2010);
- The focus changed from specific media (movies, tv programs), to more general terms such as mass and entertainment media, which are on a constant growth and changing.

Table 1: Overview of Product Placement Definitions

Author(s)	Definition * emphasis added.	Media
Steortz, 1987 (p. 22)	The *inclusion* of a brand name product package, signage, or other trademark merchandise within a motion picture, television show, or music video.	Movies
Friedman, 1991 (p. 83) (Used in (Olsen & Lanseng, 2012)	The *placing* of **commercial messages** in non-promotional contexts such as films, television, theatre and novels.	Movies, TV, Theatre
Nebenzhal & Secunda, 1993 (p. 2)	Product placement (PPL) is defined as the *inclusion* of consumer products or services in motion pictures distributed to theatres by major Hollywood studios **in return for cash fees or reciprocal promotional exposure** for the films in marketers' advertising programs.	Movies
Balasubramanian, 1994 (p. 29) (Used in (Dardis, Schmierbach, & Limperos, 2012)	A **paid product message** aimed at influencing movie (or television) audiences via the *planned and unobtrusive entry* of a branded product into a movie (or television program).	Movies, TV
Baker & Crawford, 1995 (p. 2)	The *inclusion* of commercial products or services in any form in television or film productions **in return for some sort of payment** from the advertiser.	Movies, TV
Gupta & Gould, 1997 (p. 37)	[Product placement] involves *incorporating* brands in movies **in return for money or for some promotional or other consideration** and actually is one of many types of placement which include TV, radio, music videos, video games, novels, plays and songs, as well as movies.	Movies
Karrh, 1998 (p.33) (Used in (Dardis et al., 2012)	The **paid** *inclusion* of branded products or brand identifies, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming.	Movies, TV
D'Astous & Seguin, 1999 (p. 897) (Used in (Homer, 2009)	The *placement* of a brand or a firm in a movie or in a television program by different means and for **promotional purposes**.	TV
Balasubramanian et al, 2006 (p. 115) (Used in (Homer, 2009)	Brand appearances that represent **deliberate promotional efforts** that are reinforced by formal agreements between marketers and the creators/managers of editorial content.	Movies, TV
Winkler & Buckner, 2006 (p. 24)	The term product placement is used to refer to the *positioning* of images of a brand or product in an entertainment medium such as an online game.	Games
Glass, 2007 (p. 23)	As an advertising technique, product placement involves *inserting* a brand or product into a movie, television show, book, or video game.	Games
Lehu & Bressoud, 2008 (p. 1083-4)	Product placement is a crossbreed technique, that combines different communication techniques into one, taking place in a cultural and/or entertainment environment.	Movies
Ginosar & Levi-Faur, 2010 (p. 467)	Product placement is the *purposeful incorporation* of **commercial content** into non-commercial settings, that is, a product plug generated via the fusion of advertising and entertainment.	Movies, TV
Williams et al, 2011 (p. 2)	Product placement — also known as product brand placement, in - program sponsoring, branded entertainment, or product integration — is a marketing practice in advertising and promotion wherein a brand name, product, package, signage, or other trademark merchandise is *inserted* into and used contextually in a motion picture, television, or other media vehicle for **commercial purposes**.	Movies, TV

Figure 3: Overview of Product placement definitions (Source: Chin, Wilson, Russo 2012)

2.3. Why firms chose product placement

The increasing number of media types, the decreasing attention and the exponential growth of inventive ways to avoid or skip advertising (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; Belch, Belch, 2018; Sharma, Bumb 2020; Soba, Aydin 2013), have pushed firms' marketers to find new methods to promote a brand, a product or service (Sharma, Bumb 2020) in order to satisfy strongly opinionated media consumers (Soba, Aydin 2013).

Users are more and more prone to adopt several techniques in order to circumvent advertising: this phenomenon is not only restricted to television (just think about zapping), but we can trace it also online, in the form of ad blockers add on for browsers (Belch, Belch, 2018).

Changes in the media environment drove marketers to increasingly include product placement in the marketing mix (Hudson, Hudson 2006) and, especially starting from the 1980 (Balasubramanian 1994, Sharma, Bumb 2020) product placement has become a common practice adopted by moviemakers on one side and firms on the other, to promote a brand or product in an unobtrusive way (Balasubramanian 1994) and, at the same time, to target a large audience.

Classified among the *non-traditional media* (Belch, Belch, 2018), product placement includes several elements that comes from other kinds of promotion, such as publicity, public relations, advertising and sponsorship (Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017). Actually, in certain situations, it is not easy understandable the exact purpose of the product placement, or it is not possible to lay down boundaries which permit to understand at which kind of promotion we are in front of. As an example: when a product is shown in a music videoclip, can it be considered product placement or not? Many times, artists don't talk openly about the collaborations behind the clip (Fortune 2017).

However, product placement is spreading mainly for three reasons: digital recording devices which allows consumers to view programs whenever they want and avoid commercials; new video editing tools that allows moviemakers to insert placement during post-production; diffusion of streaming platforms (Redondo, Bernal, 2016; Hudson, Hudson 2006).

These are some of the reasons why this practice has a potential strong shelf-life (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; PQ Media 2020): its effectiveness in attracting people's attention is indeed not limited to the first time someone looks, as an example, at a movie (Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011). New technologies belonging to producers also allow them to insert a product or a brand where it was not possible before, so people will see more and more product placements nestled strategically (Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011).

But why should a firm opt for product placement or include it in its IMC strategy?

What a marketer wants to achieve with a product placement strategy, is generally a positive change in consumers attitude and evaluation towards the brand (Cowley, Barron 2008; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011), an increase in brand awareness and purchase intention or behaviour (PQ Media 2021; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011). The practice of product placement is aimed at creating an emotional connection with the consumer, not just showing a product, but stimulate the authenticity of the entertainment media where it is inserted (Hudson, Hudson 2006; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011): this can increase the consumer's memory and recall of the brand or product (Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011).

2.4. Types of product placement

As we said, there are explicit and more subliminal kind of placements: it can be a can of Coca-Cola drank by the character through the movie, a billboard in the background, or a simple branded package on a table. It can be a passive placement (the product is just part of the surroundings) or an active one (it is inserted in the scripts and used by the actors who can mention it or not) (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; Sharma, Bumb 2020).

From a consumers' side there are two main factors to take into account in order to understand which kind of placement is being used: *modality* and *prominence* (Soba, Aydin 2013). Modality is linked to the way in which the product or brand is presented to the spectators. Smith (cited in Sharma, Bumb 2020) made a triple distinction with reference to the modality of a placement: visual placement, audio placement and audio-visual placement. Prominence, instead, "refers to importance, duration and frequency of product placement" (Soba, Aydin 2013, p.112).

If we change the perspective and we take into consideration the moviemaker or, more generally, the producer, there are several agreements by which they can add a branded product or service in their medium: he/she can be directly paid for by the marketing department of that specific brand of products or services (Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011) or the other way round; it can be an exchange kind agreement (for example the products are supplied for free) or part of a promotional combination (Eagle, Dahl, 2015).

A part from the agreements and regardless of the chosen ways or media, product placement can have a positive or negative impact on consumers.

Movie and television placements have generally a favorable effect on consumers' memory (Karisik, 2014). When product placement is inserted in a way that does not alter the authenticity of the content, it is proved that viewers react to them in a positive way (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; Karisik, 2014) and when the persuasive intent is not explicit, product placement is even more successful with regard to brand recall and brand attitude (Eagle, Dahl, 2015; Sharma, Bumb 2020). However, this is not always true: when the advertising and purchase intent is heavily shown, then people don't react positively, on the contrary they can be irritated by the message (Sharma, Bumb 2020).

The combination of audio and visual placements generates greater results on consumers' memory (Karisik, 2014). If the brand or product is well-known, then it will receive an even more positive response, in particular among non-users who can initially be more susceptible (Sharma, Bumb 2020; Redondo, Bernal, 2016) but then intrigued and pushed to search for more information.

Some concerns in this context can arise with regard to mainly two areas: the subliminal or subconscious impact (Sharma, Bumb 2020) and the placement of a specific category of products (called ethically charged goods, like alcohol, arms and tobacco) (Karisik, 2014) especially towards some groups of consumers like children. These latter have a restricted capacity to understand when a product is inserted for persuasion intents, and for this reason they have a restricted capacity to "protect" themselves (Eagle, Dahl, 2015). However, this already limited capacity is becoming even thinner, since studies have proven that children are attracted by a product if it is used by their favorite character in a show (Kennedy in Eagle, Dahl, 2015).

The product placement industry and some examples

Product placement is not only circumscribed to movies or television programmes, but we can see examples in literature and books, songs, tv series, video games (both online and console-based), and so on. Despite the wide variety of forms and location, the firms and producers' subliminal intention is the common factor (Sharma, Bumb 2020).

According to the last report coming from PQ Media Agency (specialized in media analysis) about product placement trends, 2019 has been the 10th consecutive year of growing for this practice. The Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted this growth, but preconditions for this 2022 are good.

Translated into numbers, this industry has increased its value by the 14.5% ($20.57 billions) in 2019. In terms of media, at the top of the chart we find TV with $14.05 billion spent on product placement, immediately followed by films; digital platforms have registered the largest growth (20.9%), as opposed to video games which has registered the slowest one (5.6%). However, we have to remember that these data are about 2019: in the pandemic period (from march 2020), more than the 80% of the global consumers had focused their attention to video games or video games contents (Nielsen 2020). This argument will be deepened in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Music

Music and lyrics are not spared by the product placement phenomenon. It is particularly accentuated in hip-hop songs (Fortune, 2017), but there are a lot of mentions also in other musical genres.

One hip-hop song example is "Low" by Flo Rida (2007); he sang "*Them baggy sweat pants and the Reeboks with the straps […] Got me like a soldier, she ready for Rover*".

Other examples outside of the hip-hop area are "Out of the woods" by Taylor Swift (2014) who sang "*You took a Polaroid of us*", or "All about that bass" by Meghan Trainor (2014) who mentioned "*I see the magazines workin' that Photoshop*", or "Versace on the floor" by Bruno Mars (2016), where the mention is directly in the title.

One of the latest examples in the Italian context is the song "Mille" by Fedez, Achille Lauro and Orietta Berti. Started as a simple product placement of Cola-Cola in the videoclip, it has then become a real collaboration between the two (Inside Marketing 2021). The song says "*Labbra rosso Coca-Cola*" ("Coca-Cola red lips"), sentence with which the company launched its summer campaign, using the videoclip to showcase the new design of the labels.

Another chapter opens if we take into consideration music videoclips, where we can find a lot of placements: a famous example is "Telephone" by Lady Gaga (2009), where there are at least 10 brand placements. The problem with videoclips is to understand when there is paid placement and when not, since artist and producers don't always disclose collaborations (Fortune 2017).

Novels

It is common that authors insert in their script specific brands or products in order to define a character, but they usually are not paid for it. One of the most known examples of paid product placement in novels is the book "The Bulgari Connection" (2000); the author, Fey Weldon, were directly contacted and paid by the famous luxury company Bulgari to write this book (Mucundorfeanu, Szambolics 2017).

Other examples are mainly related to bestseller directed to adolescents, like "Gossip Girl" (from which has been developed also a TV series) where a lot of luxury clothing brands are inserted.

Movies – "E.T. The Extra-terrestrial"

It is assumed that "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial", written and directed by Steven Spielberg in 1982, is probably one of the greatest movies of the 1980s. Inserted in the context of product placement, it is among the best successful examples. Before the movie was filmed, one of the scenes that were discussed was one with the little alien following a path of M&M's, but the company reject the collaboration. The co-producer Kathleen Kennedy decided then to negotiate the terms with Hershey Company, the owner of Reese's Pieces, rival of M&M's. Everyone who have seen the movie remember the scene when Elliot, the protagonist, leave a path of Reese's Pieces out of the wood to lure the little E.T. find his way home.

This is not the only example of product placement in this amazing production: we can also notice Coca Cola, Pizza-Hut, Reynolds Wrap and many others, but Reese's Pieces has been the star. After the film was released, many cinemas started to sell the candies at the entrance of the movie theater.

As part of the agreement between the two companies, Hershey invested $1 million in advertising and promotion, creating many promotional tools which depicted Reese's Pieces as E.T.'s favorite candies (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006). It has been estimated that in the three months following the release, the company had experienced an astounding surge in the sales of candies, up to 65% more (Soba, Aydin 2013; Williams, Petrosky, Hernandez, Page, 2011; Karisik 2014).

Hershey marketing executive Jack Down, the person who negotiated directly with Kennedy from Reese's Pieces, remember this action as "the biggest marketing coup in history". (Newell, Salmon, Chang, 2006).

TV Series

Very much like in movies, in tv series we can find plenty of examples of product placement. Some outstanding examples come from the recent famous Netflix series "Stranger Things". This series, set in the 1980s, is an immersion in those years, with thousands of brands featured in many of the scenes. With reference to the third season of the show only, it has been estimated a value of 15$ million in terms of product placements (AMA 2019). The brands registered are more than a hundred referring to several sectors, but on the top 10 we found: Adidas, Burger King, Cadillac, Casio, Chevrolet, Coca-Cola, Pentax, Reebok, Sharp and 7-Eleven (random order).

2.5. Advantages and disadvantages of product placement

As for every type of media, there are several advantages and disadvantages related to the use of product placement that influence marketers when they have to decide which one is the best strategy to adopt.

First of all, product placement cannot be avoided; there isn't any interruption in the broadcast which permits to skip it and, at the same time, modern technologies make it unlimitedly accessible (Sharma, Bumb 2020; Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017; Karisik, 2014). This is maybe the key advantage.

Since a brand or product is inserted in a context considered an entertainment experience by the consumers, perhaps it is not immediately understood as an advertising campaign (or it is not perceived at all) (Cowley, Barron 2008). This depends also on how involved the watcher is (Kureshi, Sood 2010). The reduced intrusiveness (Karisik, 2014) creates a more authentic context (Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017) and, as a consequence, it is considered more credible and generates trust in the consumer (Karisik, 2014).

Concerning the economic side, product placement is more economical than traditional media (Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017; Karisik, 2014), sometimes it is even free of charge (simply producers decide to introduce a certain product and communicate the decision to the company that takes advantage from it) and, at the same time, it has a greater efficiency: both the producers and the brands can benefit from it.

At the end, since we are still talking about a form of mass media, another advantage is related to the possibility of catching a global audience (Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017); this can simultaneously be a disadvantage if the product is not globally present.

In spite of a careful choice, the success of a placement is unpredictable and since movies can be filmed years before the release, there is also the chance of showing an out-of-date product (Górska-Warsewicz, Kulykovets, 2017).

When the persuasive intent is detected by the consumers – especially if they are very engaged with by the program or movie - they can change their mind and move their attention away from the truth created by the movie and, in a later stage, they can also change their attitude towards the brand or product (Cowley, Barron 2008) and the program itself.

Another disadvantage can be linked to the theme of the movie or TV series. As an example, when the TV series “Breaking Bad” was launched, no one want to insert their products there, because the history was about a drug dealer. They were worried about the risk of a wrong connection between the theme covered and the products. The success of the show has been huge, so much so that companies decide to ignore the topic and benefit from the large audience (CBC Radio 2015).

3. From Games to Video Games

Video games are now employed in different frameworks: from study, to work, in the field of medicine, and of course as an entertainment tool. In order to appreciate the video game world, also in this chapter it is necessary to take a step back: we need to understand what is a game, its characteristic and evolution through time because the basic elements and concepts of game have then been transmitted and adapted to video games.

3.1. Games principles through time

People is used to play games, but probably they never asked themselves what is a game. Difficulties arose when people have tried to create a satisfactory definition of game in terms of cultural and human activity, and we can say that this goal has been achieved just in the last century (Riolo, 2020, p. 89).

Throughout the years many authors with several different backgrounds have tried to give an exhaustive definition of game; in this matter, starting from the past century, we can highlight the earlier works done by the Dutch Johan Huizinga in "Homo Ludens" (1938) and the French Roger Caillos in "Man, Play and Games" (1961).

Following a chronological order, we start this review about game literature from Huizinga; he did not make exactly a study of games but, instead, he made an "inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture" (Caillois, 2001 p. 4), highlighting how many characteristics of the society and the culture are the result of a game. Huizinga defined play as follow:

> "*Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.*"[6]

[6] Huizinga in Caillois, 2001

From this definition it is possible to identify six necessary characteristics to define the play activity (de Falco D. E. 2013):

- Freedom: the involvement in a game must be free, intentional
- Extra-ordinariness: the involvement in a game is involvement in an extra-ordinary situation
- Order: where lie the attractiveness of the game itself
- Time of the game
- Space of the game
- Tension in achieving a goal
- Rules

The main matter here is that Huizinga did not differentiate play from game, he wrote about play in general terms. The difference among these two terms is easy understandable in English:

- *Play*: "to take part in a game or other organized activity" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).
- *Game*: "an entertainment activity or sport, especially played by children, or the equipment needed for such an activity" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

It is clear that with play we refer to the recreational activity, instead with game we refer to the rules which guide the conduct of a game.

Caillois worked in another direction with respect to Huizinga, and he separated the concept of play from the one of game. As opposed to Huizinga, who had a prescriptive approach to game with the aim of providing some guiding principles in the growth of the culture and the society, Caillois pointed out the game as a separate space (de Falco D. E. 2013). The French author differentiates the game from other activities but, at the same time, he underlines that it is not possible to have just a kind of game, so this statement makes it necessary to classify them (de Falco D. E. 2013). For the purpose of this dissertation, the relevant distinction made by Caillois is the one aforementioned between *Paidia* and *Ludus*. The first (also referred to as "playing") "denotes a more free-form, expressive, improvisational, even "tumultuous" recombination of behaviors and meanings" (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011). On the other hand, *Ludus* (also referred to as "gaming") is about the playing but under structured rules and with the aim of collecting some goals (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011). These two elements are on the same level, they are opposite poles of the same line.

As his predecessor, also Caillois identified 6 elements to define a game (de Falco 2013) which are, despite the different approach to the subject, in line with the ones identified by Huizinga:

- Freedom: absence of constrains

- Separated activity: circumscribed in terms of space and time
- Uncertainty
- Unproductivity
- Rules
- Fictitious activity: different from the reality

In addition to the elements highlighted before, and the "raw" definition of gaming given by Caillois, many other definitions of game have been stated over time, but all seems to include three basic components, even if they then put the emphasis on an element or another according to the specific connotation of the definition (Juul 2003, Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011):

1) *The game*, the system constructed by the explicit rules of the game;
2) *The player*, the relation between the subject and the game itself toward the collection of some goals;
3) *The world*, how the playing interacts with everybody and everything else in the world.

The first two points can be compared to what Huotari and Hamari defined as the systemic component and the experiential component of a game (Huotari, Hamari 2012):

- The systemic component is about how a game is set up;
- The experiential component is about the human immersion within the game.

After this brief excursus about the ingredients of a game, one of the latest and maybe most complete definition of game seems then to be the one by the author Jesper Juul in his paper "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness" (2003), where he analyzes seven past definitions of different authors with the aim to highlight the common and the different traits. He wrote:

> "*A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable*."[7]

If we take each single part of this definition, we can't define a game; only the whole elements together can define it (Juul, 2003: Huotari, Hamari 2012). The single elements are:

1. Fixed rules
2. Variable, quantifiable outcome
3. Value assigned to possible outcomes

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[7] (Juul 2003)

4. Player effort
5. Player attached to the outcome
6. Negotiable consequences

3.2. Gamification

A question now arises: are game elements circumscribed to the game world?
The answer is quite obvious: no. We can find the basic game elements in many circumstances that we call *gamification* and *serious games* and, how it will also be exposed later in this chapter, they have been reproduced and adapted to the video game world.
Starting from gamification, to easy understand what it is, it could be convenient to start with an example: the "Starbucks Reward" app. This app has gamified the way to buy the company's products and, by buying in store, you collect stars that will allow you to obtain a free coffee once you have collected a certain number of them. This is an interesting example of how through gamification it is possible to increase the engagement with customers and build their loyalty (La Vopa, 2021).
Beginning with the theory, one of the most complete and understandable definition of *Gamification* is: the "use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011).
The term gamification has first appeared in the digital media industry around 15 years ago (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011), to be more specific in 2008 in Brett Terill's blog about Social Games[8] where, in a post, he referred to this expression as "taking game mechanics and applying them to other web properties to increase engagement" (Huotari, Hamari 2012). The term has been widely spread and adopted from the second half of 2010 with the common definition by Detering et al. before mentioned.
Another attending definition of gamification is the one given by Huotary and Hamary in 2012, in their paper "Defining Gamification – A Service Marketing Perspective". As the title suggest, they approached gamification from another side and, instead of focusing on the systemic nature of the phenomenon, they emphasized the experiential side of it. According to the authors "Gamification refers to: a process of enhancing a service with affordances for gameful experiences in order to support user's overall value creation" (Huotari, Hamari 2012).

[8] The term Social Games refers to several kinds of games, bot online and offline which require social interaction between the players (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_game)

Gamification has spread over the year especially because of the increased use of the game elements in everyday activity: to facilitate learning and motivation (Grund 2015), in enterprise contexts, training, health and so on (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011). The intensive increase of digital media has also helped the intensification in the use of gamification (La Vopa, 2021).

The final aim of gamification is to engage a certain target of people and, more generally, the stakeholder of an organization, which could be inside or outside the same (Nordio in Boaretto, 2020). The use of gamification stimulates "some first instincts of the human being with the purpose to satisfy desires and needs" (Nordio, 2021).

On the other hand of gamification, we have serious games: they are developed to overcome the simple entertainment (Grund 2015). The concept derives from the military sector, and the main aim is to develop and/or let people acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive way, but in a simulated and protected ludic environment (La Vopa in Nordio, 2021; Nordio, Fiscato, 2017).

3.3. The adaption of game principles to video games

How did it get from games to video games?

Video games, as maybe any phenomena, have a strong heritage: in the 1950s there were the big mainframes where to play OXO (Tic-Tac-Toe) or Tennis for Two, but already in the 1980s with game rooms and the first home computer (Commodore 64) it is possible to observe the basic traits which actually define the video games industry (Edery, Mollick 2009, p.23; Riolo 2020). The first ways of playing video games were the arcade machine, like Pac-Man, placed in bars or pizza restaurants, symbolic places of the first generations of gamers (Riolo 2020, p.94). Then video games landed in players' homes: dedicated consoles, like Atari 2600, and personal computer became common instruments (Edery, Mollick 2009, p. 23).

But how to define a video game? It is easy to start by the dictionary definition: a video game is "*a game in which the player controls moving pictures on a screen by pressing buttons*" (Cambridge Dictionary 2022).

By decomposing the expression there is two sides. On one side there is the term *video*, which clearly seems to indicate that to play a video game some kinds of graphics should appear in a visual form on a screen (Wolf, Perron 2003). On the other side there is *game*, which undoubtedly refers to the basic game elements aforementioned.

According to Juul[9], the six elements which he stated in his definition of game reported above (elements necessary and sufficient to define a game - fixed rules, variable and quantifiable outcome, value assigned to possible outcomes, player effort, player attached to the outcome and negotiable consequences) are a "sort of immaterial support" common to all the kinds of games, regardless of the media support. The author (Juul 2003) looks at the video games (he refers just to computer games, but it is possible to extend the concept to video games in general) as the latest evolution through the millennia of games. This is possible because, by definition, games are a transmedia phenomenon (Juul, 2003; Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011) and computers, smartphones and consoles are now the media that upholds the rules.

Therefore, as for game definition, to delineate a video game there must be some concurrent elements (Wolf, Perron 2003; Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011):

- The interface and design patterns
- The algorithm or mechanics
- The specific game principles
- The player activity
- The graphics

Just to make a parallel between games and video games, the latter are, as the firsts, limited in the time and space (Riolo 2020, p.106).

In order to contextualize the adaptation of the game principles to video games, Juul[10] defined three immaterial supports, intrinsic to each game media:

1. *"Computation*, how the specific medium upholds rules and determine the reactions to the different inputs
2. *Game state*, how the game state is recorded
3. *Interface*, the influence of the players on the game state" (Juul 2003, p. 264)

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the inclusion of video games in their marketing strategies offers to companies the possibility to deeply engage with the target consumers, with the chance to create immersive storytelling with which gamers can interact.

[9] (Juul, 2003)

[10] (Juul, 2003)

3.4. Trends in the video game industry

After an excursus about the characteristics of a game, then adapted to the context of gamification and video games, we now briefly analyze the trends in the video games industry that have taken place in the last two years and that we suppose we will see increasingly in 2022.

3.4.1. The market

To deeply understand the potential of the video games market, it is necessary to have a look at some numbers.

According to a recent report by the consulting company Accenture, the gaming market has reached a worth that exceed the value of music and movie markets combined (Accenture, 2021; OC&C Strategy Consultant 2021). Video games has reached $175 billion value in 2020 (Redazione Economia, 2021), but the overall direct and indirect value of the gaming industry is estimated to overcome the $300 billion (Accenture 2021), versus $23.1 billion from music (Statista, 2022) and $234 billion coming from the film and video services market (Business Wire, 2021).

Games are becoming no longer a product-centric element, they are becoming more service-centric, where social interaction and the transmedia elements are becoming the reference points (Accenture 2021).

3.4.2. Demography of gamers

The traditional stereotype of the gamer has always been related to the young, antisocial man (GWI 2021; Accenture 2021; Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014), a figure that has consistently been emphasized by films and TV series, but which is nowadays surpassed.

As opposed to what someone can think, the gaming audience has not exceptionally increased during the pandemic period, but instead the hours someone spend with a video game grew significantly (GWI 2021). Here below some insights about the hours on average spent playing (Figure 4) and about the demography of gamers in the United States (by age group) and in Italy (by gender) (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

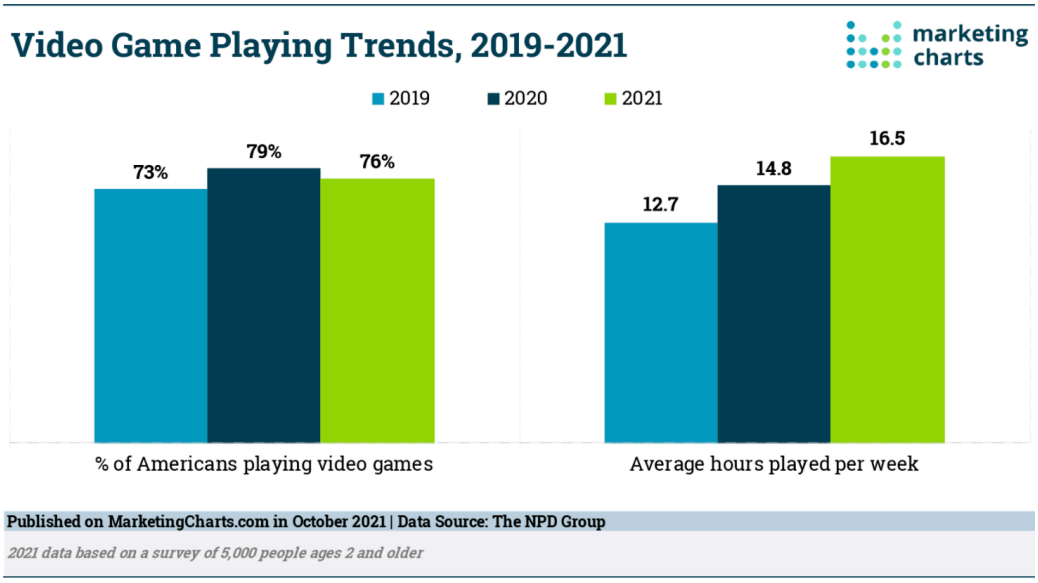

Figure 4: % of Americans playing video games and average hours played per week (Source: Marketing Charts, 2021)

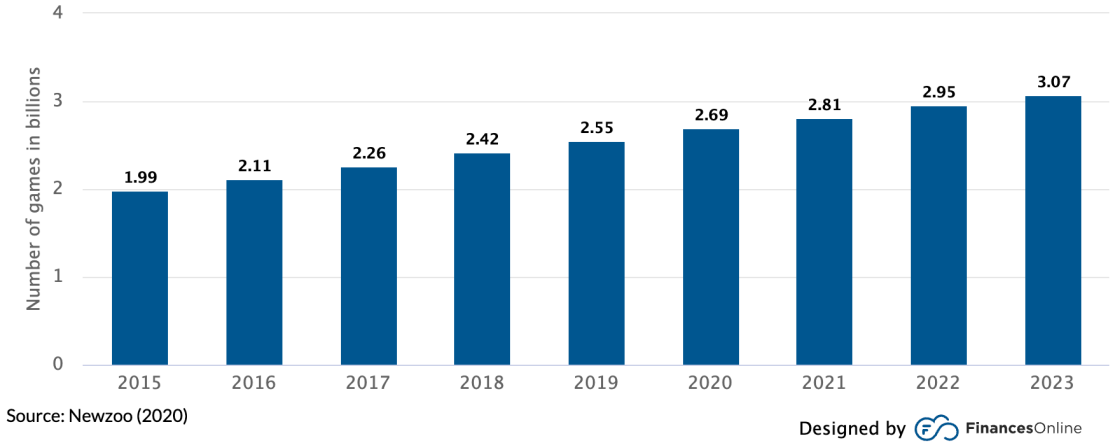

Figure 5: Number of active gamers worlwide - 2015 to 2023 (Source: Newzoo in FinancesOnline)

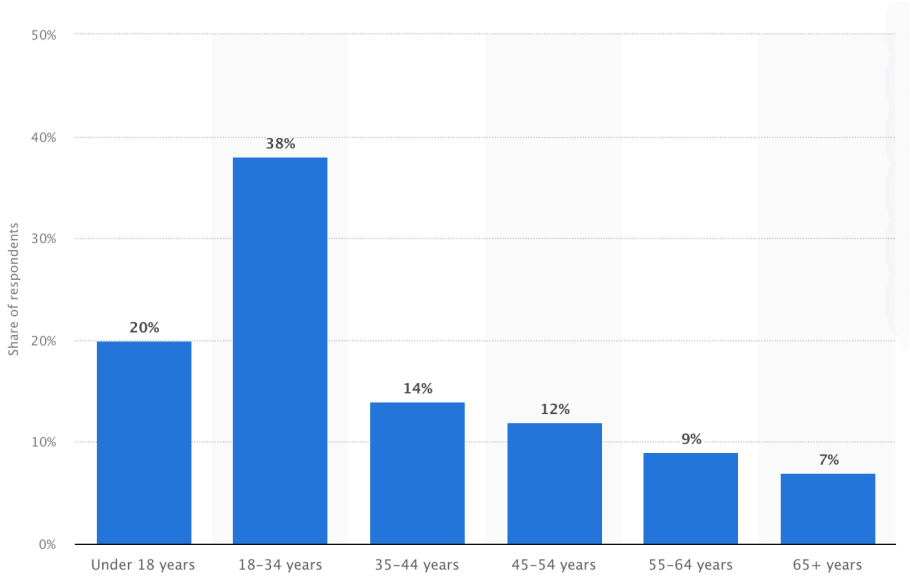

Figure 6: Distribution of video gamers in the United States in 2021, by age group (Source: Statista.com)

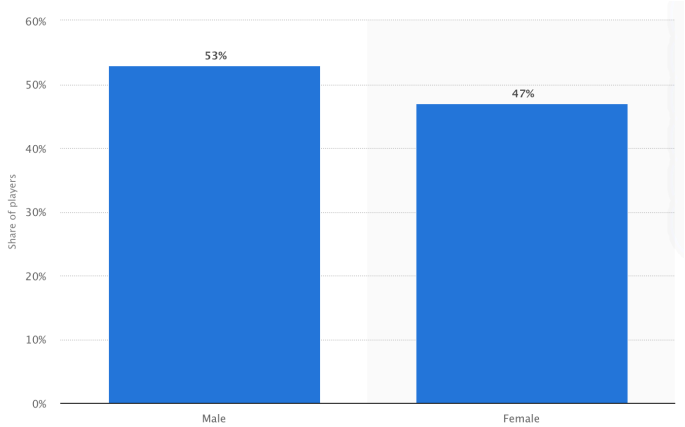

Figure 7: Distribution of gamer in Italy in 2019 by gender (Source: Statista.com)

By analyzing these different charts, it emerges clearly the impact and the potential of video games: the most active age group include people from 18 to 34 years old, and the number of gamers is expected to exceed 3 billion next year (Figure 5). They play more than 16 hours per week, and this huge time enjoyed in front of a screen is a potential opportunity for companies to reach their target consumers.

Other facts about the video games demography (Yanev 2022):

- There are more than 2.5 billion video gamers around the world (one third of the global population) (Accenture 2021)
- The average gamer is 34 years old
- 70% of gamers are age 18 or older
- 70% of parents believe video games have a positive influence on their children's lives
- Female gamers are on the rise (Yokoi, 2021) – in chapter four there will be a brief deepening about this topic related to the experience of one of the interviewed.

2020 and 2021 have been two major years for the gaming industry, both from a positive and a negative perspective: the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has made unstable this sector (like all the other ones) with delayed games releases, shortages in next-gen game consoles and other financial problems related to the cancellation of trade shows and conventions (CMS, 2022). Nonetheless, as mentioned above, this industry is expected to exceed the $200 billion direct revenues in 2023 (GWI 2021).

3.4.3. Emerging Trends

Here follows an excursus about the main actual trends in the video game industry.

1. New platforms for indie games [11]

"An indie game, short for independent video game, is a video game typically created by individuals or smaller development teams without the financial and technical support of a large game publisher" (Wikipedia, 2022). Since they have not the support that a large developer can propose, usually indie games are released via online platforms. Roblox and Steam are the most known.

Roblox is platform launched in 2006 and now available on several devices where users can create their own video games (Dredge, 2019). Especially popular among people under the age of 18, they can use the intuitive kit given by the platform (Roblox Studio)[12] to develop their own games: this is a great opportunity since developers can directly get in touch among them and, at the same time, they can give and obtain feedback from the users. Roblox is also widely used in the context of gamification for education purposes (Accenture 2021).

Similar to Roblox is Steam: launched in 2003, it now offers more than 30.000 games to play online (from mainstream games to indie games) plus instruments to help developers to include Steam's function in the products they propose on the platform (Wikipedia, 2022).

The real threat to Steam seems, however, seems to be Epic Games: especially known for Fortnite (it is the unique platform where it is possible to access the game), this platform offers to its visitors also some other games that you can't find elsewhere.

2. Cloud Gaming Services grow and expand[13]

If watching a film or TV series, or listen to your favorite music has become a piece of cake with platforms such as Netflix or Spotify, why play a video game in streaming should not? Cloud gaming bypass all the problems related to download a game: slow connection, not enough space in your hard-disk, waiting time, and so on. The most important feature is that this technology cancels the initial costs of buying the physical game or console (OC&C 2020).

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[11] (Howart 2021), (Maryville University 2022)

[12] (Roblox 2022)

[13] (Howart 2021), (Beattie 2021)

This new way of playing allows people to start playing immediately even the latest games and just few minutes after the release. With this kind of technologies, you don't necessarily need to buy or have a game console or PC because you can access top of the range games across multiple devices in streaming (CMS, 2022).

All the big industries are entering this new system (Microsoft Project xCloud, Google Stadia, Apple Arcade, …) which has basically eliminated manufacturing, shipping and storage costs and, as a consequence, all these industries are now fighting for a part of the market share and they strive to release meaningful contents to ensure a valuable service to their consumers (CMS 2022).

This new phenomenon, also called "Games As A Service" (GaaS), are a way to obtain a continuous source of revenue and monetize not just at the release moment (Wikipedia 2022; C&C 2020). The constant collection of revenue includes:

- Subscription fees
- Microtransactions, to purchase additional feature in the game (OC&C 2021) like skins or V Bucks in Fortnite
- Season passes

3. *Remakes and reboots* [14]

Crash Bandicoot, Final Fantasy VII, The Resident Evil: these are just some games that have been reviewed and launched again in the market in the last months. Like the movie industry, developers are taking this road in order to boost and continue to monetize old (but best seller) games.

4. *Early-access as a way to obtain feedbacks and hype*[15]

Gamers can play the game of the moment event months in advance and, at the same time, developers can have insightful feedbacks from the player which can help them analyze the performance of the game and, as a consequence, they can adjust it if there are some problems.

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[14] (Howart 2021), (Beattie 2019)

[15] (Howart 2021)

5. *Gaming as a social forum*[16]

The social function of video games is undoubtedly a growing trend. Especially during the lockdown periods, people who were forced to stay at home found in games a way to entertain themselves, share opinion and interest and, most of all, maintain social interactions (Skwarczek, 2021; GWI. 2021; Accenture, 2021).

Virtual spaces and communities have also been the stage for large, immersive events and concert with tens of millions of spectators, e.g., 12 million people attended Travis Scott's concert on Fortnite on April 2020 (Redazione Economia, 2021).

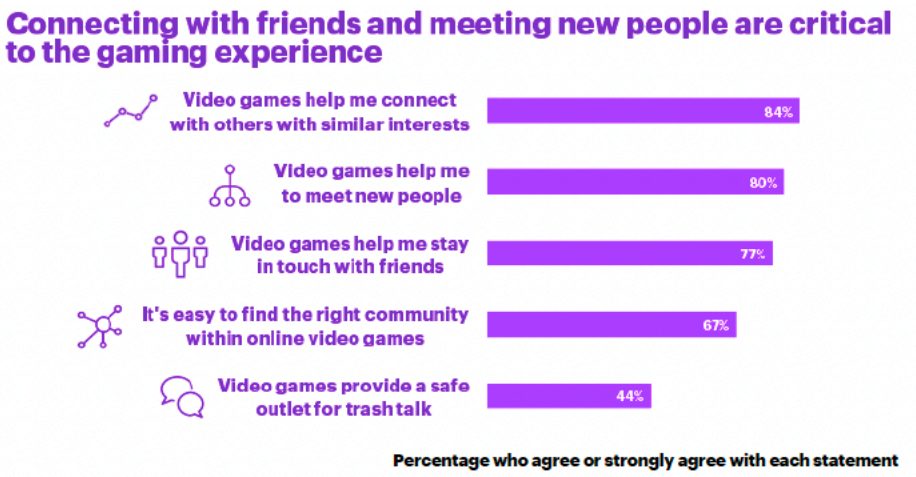

Figure 8: How much is important the social element in the gaming experience (Source: Accenture, 2021)

6. *E-sports*

Starting from the definition, e-sport are the multiplayer games played online for a wide range of spectators usually by a pro-gamer[17]. As the engagement with the e-sport increases, even the opportunities for brands are on an exponential growth (GWI 2021). This is a great opportunity for them to fill the gap and introduce product placement: "Sponsorship stands to pay off, but to really engage this group, brands need to understand their unique culture and what matters to

[16] (Beattie 2019)

[17] "A pro gamer is a full-time competitive player who is paid to play video games. It is almost like a career in the gaming field. Most professional players are normally paid by their teams or sponsors to compete in the biggest esports tournaments around the world. Many of these tournaments offer huge cash rewards for the winners and can make up the bigger part of a seasoned gamer's earnings." (Techni Sport 2020)

them" (GWI 2021). A company can sponsor a player, a team or even an event (Vasilyeva, 2020).

7. *Watching games on dedicated platforms*

Twitch and YouTube Gaming are the two major platforms where gamers "discover and enjoy titles" (OC&C 2020). This way of benefit video game content is quickly become an active and social way of entertainment where fans can directly interact with professional pro-gamers. It is estimated that people spend almost 8 eight hours a week watching they favorite players and/or interact in their live streams (Accenture 2021).
These kinds of platforms are also a direct opportunity for companies. As an example, in 2021 Burberry transmitted its fashion show in live streaming on Twitch (Bumpus 2021).

3.5. Product Placement in Video Games

Before going a little deeply into the specific topic of product placement in video games (bearing in mind that the literature is limited, and mainly focused on the effects of this kind of methodology and not on the opportunities for a company) it is necessary to define game advertising. This world is basically divided into three areas (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014):

- Advergames
- Around game advertising
- In-game advertising or product placement

Advergames

Advergames are "a digital game specifically designed for the primary purpose of advertising and promotion of an organizations product, service or brand played via the internet or on a compatible medium via a games disc or download" (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014).
The term advergame derives from the mix of "game" and "advertising", and they are created around a brand or a company. They are a way adopted by companies to first of all deliver a message (Terlutter, Capella 2013) and to let target consumer live an experience, generate a direct response and build loyalty (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014; Ambrosio 2022).
Throughout the years many companies have adopted this kind of marketing strategy, but the most remembered examples are:

- Coca Cola (1983) with its "Pepsi Invaders". It was a reproduction of the iconic "Space Invaders", but the aliens were substituted by the letters of the word Pepsi and the vehicle represented a Coca Cola bottle (Freeman 2014).
- Burger King (2006) who released with its menu a series of three Xbox games ("Pocket Bike Racer", "Big Bumpin", "Sneak King"). Each game had the cost of $3,99, and allowed the company to obtain a revenue around $12 million (Bump, 2019).

Around-game advertising

"Advertising and promotion linked to video and computer games through non-intrusive around game displays or licensing of game branding with associated third-party products" (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014).

This kind of advertising is similar to television spots and usually takes the form of banners in all the static moments of the game (before play or among levels). Cross promotion also falls into this category (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014).

In-game advertising

"The integration of non-fictional products and brands within the playing environment of video & computer games through simulated real life marketing communications mechanism" (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014).

The most widely used method of in-game advertising is product placement. There are several ways in which a products or brands can be inserted in a game (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014):

- Cosmetic placement, to make the game more real
- Integrated placement, placements with which the player can interact (example: in Death Stranding has been introduced some cans of Monster Energy which allowed the main character to obtain a temporary boost[18])
- Static in game advertising, fix placement inserted directly in the code of the game (so before the release) (Terlutter, Capella 2013)
- Dynamic in game advertising, which can be modified even if the game has been released (this is mainly allowed for games which can be connected to internet). The best example of this kind of placement dates back to 2008, when the ex-president Obama, during his

[18] (Fandom 2022)

campaign, placed in 18 different games (like Burnout Paradise) (CBC Radio 2015) several political messages. This strategy allows him to conquer people's trust (Freeman 2014).

These have been the common methods employed by companies to reach gamers (Williamson Smith, Sun, Mackie 2014), even if the most employed kinds of games where to use them are sport and racing ones (gamers' opinion about this topic will be analyzed in the questionnaire data).

When a company has to decide how to include the placement in a video game, it has to consider many aspects: location and prominence of the placement, gamer's involvement, type of game and congruity of the brand with the game theme (Terlutter, Capella 2013). As concerns the reaction of the consumers to the placements, usually brand recall and recognition are studied (Terlutter, Capella 2013; Glass 2007).

Table 1. Summary of main types of in-game advertising

Type of in-game advertising	Type/level of interaction	Examples
1. Sponsorship/part of other cross-media e.g. movie, sports league, characters.	Active/high	*FIFA* series; *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*; *Spiderman 2*; *Harry Potter*.
2. Brand features heavily in gameplay e.g. assets, equipment, tools.	Active/high	Cars in the *Gran Turismo* series; Kawasaki jet skis in *Kawasaki Jet Ski Racing*; simple web-based games.
3. Background advertisements used in gaming environment.	Passive/low	*Seiko* scoreboard in *Gran Turismo*; Barclays on advertising sideboards in *FIFA* series.
4. Popular music and sports commentators.	Passive/low	Jon Champion and Mark Lawrenson commentary in *Pro Evolution Soccer 2008*; licensed soundtrack in *Project Gotham Racing 4*.
5. 'Edge cases' where a brand is not present within the game.	Passive/low	Pepsi-branded Nintendo DS in Japan.

Figure 9: Summary of the main types of in-game advertising (Source: Ip, 2009)

What about, instead, the kind of game, as mentioned few lines above, there are some games "best suited" than other to include product placement. Follows below a table which exhibits the classification of the kinds of games and an example (if existing) of product placement. The

classification is not exhaustive, but it reflects a question asked in the questionnaire employed to collect data for the purpose of this dissertation.

GENRES	VIDEO GAMES	EXAMPLE OF PP
Racing	Gran Turismo, Mario Kart	Mario Kart 8 Mercedes partnered with Nintendo and in this release of the game it was inserted Mercedes karts (Sirtori 2020)
Sport	Fifa series	Matches and squads are the reproduction of a real stadium and situation, with banners around the football field changing
Simulation	Sim City, Animal Crossing	Animal Crossing Valentino created its own custom clothing line, while Gillette Venus put in place its line of skins tones and elements (like hair, tatoos and so on) in order to promote its campaign "My Skin. My Way" (Ypulse 2020). Art industry is not excluded: Getty Museum made availabe all of its pieces of art inside the game (Vasilyeva 2020)
Shooter	Apex, Call of Duty, Battelfield 2042	Battelfied 2042 - Logitech mouse (Co 2021)
Fighting	Mortal Kombat	Introduction of "The Hangover" promotion billboard on the roof of a building (interviewed testimony)
Strategy	League of Legents (MOBA game - Multiplayer online battle arena)	Louis Vuitton designed the throphy for the League of Legends World Championship, in addition to a cloting line (Vasilyeva 2020)
Platform	Super Mario Bros, Crash Bandicoot	
Role-playing	Final Fantasy	Luna's wedding dress designed by Vivienne Westwood, American Express logo on a shop window (Fandom 2022)
Battle Royale	Fortnite	Marvel, NFL, Marshmello, Nerf, Stranger Things, Jordan, Dc Comics and many more (Fandom 2022)
Casual	Among us	

Table 1: Examples of product placement in different kind of video games (Source: personal elaboration)

There are, finally, many advantages related to inclusion of product placement in video games in a company's marketing strategy (if of course the video games audience is in line with the campaign's one):

- Trackable viewability (with specific tools) (Skinner 2020)
- Real time campaigns (Skinner 2020)
- Long time brand exposure (Skinner 2020)
- Interactivity (Glass 2007)
- Immersive storytelling (Glass 2007)

4. Research on the field

This last chapter has the aim to answer at the main research question "Is it possible to define product placement in video games as a new promising area of investments for companies and their brands?" in two main ways. First, with some interviews to experts and passionate in the sector of video games and, secondly, with the analysis of the data originating from the distribution of the questionnaire described in the first chapter.

4.1. Interviews with experts and passionate

After a research on LinkedIn based on the keywords "video games" and "product placement", I found three people that could best give an insight into the topic:

- Matilde Tusberti, employee at Epic Games, who gave me her personal opinion about product placement in video games (not connected in any way to some aspect of the company she works for);
- Micaela Romanini, deputy director of VIGAMUS[19] Foundation and founder of the community "Women in Games Italia";
- Manuel Maximilian Riolo, professor at the Sapienza University in Rome, specialized in the philosophical aesthetic of games and video games passionate.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the questionnaire constructed to collect data has been distributed also via the mailing list of Digra Italia (Italian Digital Games Research Association). One of the registered people answered me, interest in the topic, and exposed me his point of view[20].

At all the interviewed has been posed from 4 to 6 questions, focused on understanding their opinion about the introduction of product placement in video games, based on their professional experience and passion for the video games world.

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[19] Video Games Foundation and Museum in Rome. "The objective of VIGAMUS Foundation is to promote and spread the knowledge of the cultural importance of video games in Italy, a nation characterized by a vast public of games. Video games are therefore part of the historic and artistic structure of the "Belpaese", whose primacy in the world is indisputable. Cultural innovations, more than technological ones, represent the foundation for the creation of a real culture of video games, very special objects which deserve to be understood and studied, but, first of all, preserved." (Vigamus 2022).

[20] At the specific request of the subject, the person is not mentioned for privacy reasons.

Matilde Tusberti

1. In your opinion, what is the role of product placement in video games?

"Product placement in video games is a very strong strategy to reach a wide target audience and let them know a company or a product. The association of the product with the video games must be thought and prepared well in advance, in order to prepare a precise strategy and avoid negative involuntary associations. As an example: a video game object which provides defense against something, like a shield, is more consistent with "AXA Insurance" compared to an assault object like a crossbow."

2. Generally speaking, do you think that product placement interferes with the game experience? (The same question has been posed in the questionnaire)

"Personally, I see product placement as an addition to the game experience. If it interferes heavily with game mechanisms, there may be a risk of a change of association from positive to negative. The negative association of a product introduced in a video game is automatically transferred to the brand or the product itself, it is therefore necessary to be careful and try to avoid this kind of automatic process in the gamer."

3. In your opinion, which are the problems that could arise by the introduction of product placements in a video game?

"The abuse of this practice. If we insert too much products in a video game, it results like there is no one. It is necessary to enhance each product and/or collaboration, trying to have a few at a time."

4. Which are, in your opinion, one pro and one cons of product placement in video games?

"Product placement in video games is a doubled-edged sword. Its global reach allows for the engagement of a huge population, but at the same time it is possible to make a simple mistake related to local customs and traditions. Marketers need to be very careful, and this is why I stress that the strategy must be prepared well in advance."

5. Do you think that product placement in video games is a practice still little exploited? Do you think that there are good growth opportunities for this marketing strategy?

"I think product placement in video games is developing in Europe. In North America it is a widely used marketing tool, even if it has not reached its maximum yet. So, opportunities are flourishing."

6. Why should a company choose to opt for the introduction of one of its brands in a video game?

"The main advantage of introducing a placement in a video game is related to the specific target it can attract (in terms of age and population). Newspapers, TV, websites, OOH adv, they all have a different target consumer, and this holds also for video games, in accordance with the constrains related to the game topic."

Micaela Romanini

1. What is your opinion about product placement in video games?

"Product placement in video games is undoubtedly a powerful instrument. We find several examples of this practice in the past: from the companies that have created their own game, more properly called advergame (like McDonalds), to the billboards inserted in the various racing or sport games which replicate the real ones that we find, for example, at the stadium. Thinking about the current situation, there are instead some fascinating implication and more interesting examples because the practice has moved to other kinds of game and platforms. Companies are moving towards the video game sector to promote their products, and they want to do it almost exclusively on these game platforms. A perfect example is Twitch, where thousands of people look for entertainment contents and where throughout the pandemic period many fashion companies have organized their shows. But an even more thrilling example is Fortnite, where has been organized real performances, like the one with Travis Scott, linked to hundreds of sponsors."

2. Which are, in your opinion, one pro and one cons of product placement in video games?

"Video games are going to be legitimized and the potential is in the public eye, so I think that there are no cons in the adoption of this kind of strategy. "

3. In your opinion, why a company should choose to opt for the introduction of one of its brands in a video game?

"Certainly, a company should opt for product placement in a video game in order to reach an audience that they can't reach elsewhere. Video game's audience is used to interact and engage in a totally new way with respect to traditional media. Reconnecting to Twitch, always during the pandemic it has reach the trillion of viewers, and this must be a red-flag for companies to understand and evaluate the striking potential of these new platforms. It is also a way to do innovative campaigns: in a world where we are bombed by promotional message, the choice of this medium results to be the most interesting to make headlines and be more impressive. Product placement in video games is un under investigated area, companies don't have to miss this opportunity."

Because of the working experience of Micaela, I finally posed her another kind of question, in order to obtain some insights about the specific role of women in the video game sector.

4. How is evolving the video games sectors with reference to women?

"Actually, 42% to 46% of the gamers in Europe are women. This information is however referred to mobile games, where there are some titles usually more suited to a casual audience: people who usually play in the free moments, like for example while waiting the bus or waiting for the lunch to be ready. These games have a different kind of themes, a lower difficulty, reasons for why it is more likely that they are played by women as a hobby or people that don't play in general. Moving to consoles and PCs, in recent years women has approached also this kind of titles even if the increase is not very important, and the increase is mainly due to the introduction of more narrative games. To make an extreme comparation, in the 1890s games were target to the young, white, man and all the titles were concentrated on the challenge, race or fight. Nowadays there is also more consciousness about the fact that video games are not a prerogative of men, and women feel free to enter this new world."

Manuel Maximilian Riolo

1. What is your opinion about product placement in video games?

"Product placement is the future for companies' marketing strategies. In front of a market which is exponentially growing, a company should see investing in video games as an absolute attractive option. When I think about product placement, I immediately think at the experience, at the immersive storytelling that just video games can provide to gamers."

2. In your opinion, which are the problems that could arise by the introduction of product placements in a video game?

"Problems with this kind of practice could be related to the category of product inserted and the relationship with the gamer, especially with reference to the age of the gamer. As an example, if in PES there is a placement of "Poker Star", is it right that a teenager is exposed to this? Considering the always increasing time that a person spent playing video games, maybe some kind of compulsive gambling can arise."

3. Which are, in your opinion, one pro and one cons of product placement in video games?

"One pro is the potential experience connected to the video game: to deeply appreciate the video game, the kind of experience that the gamer can live is central. This, in turn, can help the company to understand the advantages that the gamer brings out from the game, and then create from this a complete customer experience: inside and outside the entertainment moment. A

disadvantage can be related to a possible negative association because, for example, the game has not been well developed or the gamer finds the play experience frustrating."

4. Do you think that product placement in video games is a practice still little exploited? Do you think that there are good growth opportunities for this marketing strategy?

"Absolutely. I believe that it is a forgotten market area because, even if prejudices are changing, video games are under evaluated on principle. This is because in the mass media sector and according to the common opinion, video games are still identified as a tool for children. But it is not like this! And even so, the example that best support the expansion of this market is Fortnite: a game especially addressed to children and teenagers which generate an unimaginable profit. We have seen a wave movement in every kind of media, so it is indisputable that companies will take video games into consideration in a near future."

5. Why should a company choose to opt for the introduction of one of its brands in a video game?

"Companies can obtain a huge return of image from this practice. If it is able to recognize the motive which push a person to play, then it has hit the target. Another key aspect is the interaction: where there is interaction, inevitably the relationship changes from a psychological and emotional point of view. Even the response to the advertising stimulus can change. Video games offer possibilities that the other media can't offer: first of all, the interactivity, then the experience and the possibility of being someone else for some time. This is the strength of video games, what justify its wide diffusion. Interactivity and experience are also the link with any kind of exploiting economic policy: gamers are a category of people who like to spend, and they are inevitably attractive for companies."

Digra Italia member

"Product placement in video games is an undoubtedly auspicious area of investments for companies, as some recent examples can confirm: Fortnite with thousands of brands, Death Stranding with Monster Energy, or when Barack Obama showed some billboards for its political campaign in a famous racing car. The thing is that I like to think at advertising as a delicate profession, and in video games this principle is multiplicated. One reason is because we are talking about a market little explored, and another reason is related to the different dynamics inherent in video games, which are totally different from movies and TV series, mainly in terms of interactivity and potential exposure of the brand to the public. More than in the movie sector, I think that product placement in video games is related to the year and decade

in which it is launched in the market. The pervasiveness of the product placement could have some negative long-terms effects if it is not well thought, also because nowadays some brands are really volatile. A good starting point to develop a product placement that could produce long-term positive benefits are the experiences related to the "virtual tourism" that we have seen from 2009, like the classic example of Monteriggioni in Assassin's Creed II. The main reason why a company should choose a video game to promote its product or brand is the wide range of potential target consumers."

After these interviews it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions.
Product placement in video games offers companies some possibilities that are nowadays less available with traditional media: first of all, the chance to reach a wide audience (even at global level) which, at the same time, is a very specific target audience, the chance to create new innovative campaigns intrinsic to immersive storytelling and the long-time exposure. But what strongly emerges from these interviews, and what distinguishes video games from traditional media and made it an unquestioned attractive tool for companies, is the interactivity and engagement between the gamer and the game. As every product follow different stages, video games are in the midst of its growing phase, with genres and titles launched regularly. Prejudices are almost exceeded, and opportunities for every sector are on the rise.
These findings make it possible to define product placement in video games as a new powerful instrument, inherent in a forgotten market area that is exponentially growing and, as a consequence, many companies are going to find it attractive and adopt it in the near future.

4.2. Questionnaire data, analysis and discussion

The aim of this paragraph is to show the data collected through the distribution of the questionnaire, analyze and comment them. 245 answers have been collected in the period from 04/01/2022 to 07/02/2022. As mentioned in the first chapter, the questionnaire is twofold, and for this reason has been collected data on two fronts: about product placement in video games, and about product placement in TV series, in order to compare the first emerging strategy with the latter consolidated one.

The sample

The questionnaire has received 245 complete answers. The sample is composed by the 47,8% of female, the 51,8% of male and the 0,4% preferred not to reveal the gender. As regards the

breakdown by age groups, the majority is in the range 25-34 (49%), follows the range 14-24 (40%), and the remaining 11% is over 34.

More than the 80% (83,3% - 204 out of 245) answered from Italy, and the remainder from several countries around the world.

Age group	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Total	%
14 - 24	50	49		99	40%
25 - 34	61	59	1	121	49%
34 - 44	3	13		16	7%
Over 45	3	6		9	4%
Total	117	127	1	245	
%	47,8%	51,8%	0,4%	100%	100%

Table 2: Distribution of the sample by age group in numbers and percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

As regards people's actual employment, the largest categories are composed by employed people and university students (both 40% of the sample) then, in decreasing order there are: unemployed people (9%), entrepreneurs (8%) and high school students (4%).

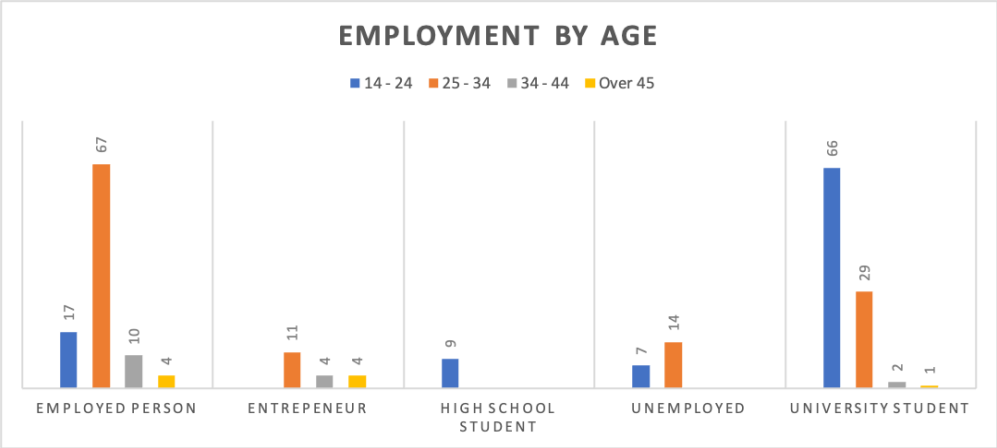

Figure 10:Subdivision of the respondents at the questionnaire by employment and age (Source: personal elaboration)

After this general profiling, the questionnaire investigated people's preference between video games and TV series with the direct question: "Do you prefer playing video games or watching TV series?". 144 people (59% of the sample) answered TV series, the remainder 101 (41%) video games. Figure 11 shows the distribution of the answers by gender, and then others two graphs (Figure 12 and Figure 13) highlight the preference among TV series and video games by age group and gender. As it is possible to see, females prefer watching TV series (98 out of

117 females – 84%), and the majority is concentrated between 14 and 34 years old. Males, instead, prefer to play video games (82 out of 127 males – 65%).

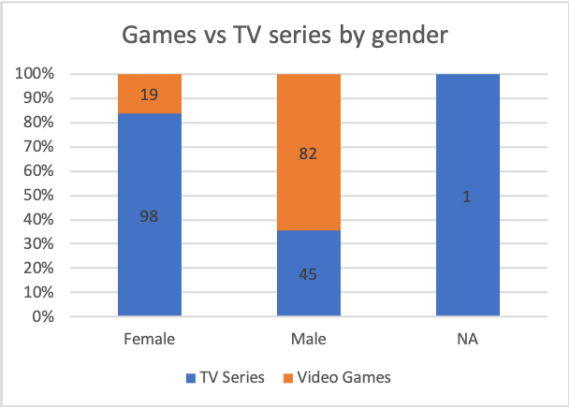

Figure 11: Distribution of the preferences between video games and TV series by gender (Source: personal elaboration)

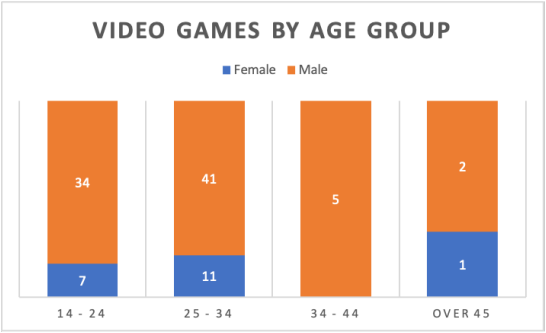

Figure 12: Preferences for video games by age group (Source: personal elaboration)

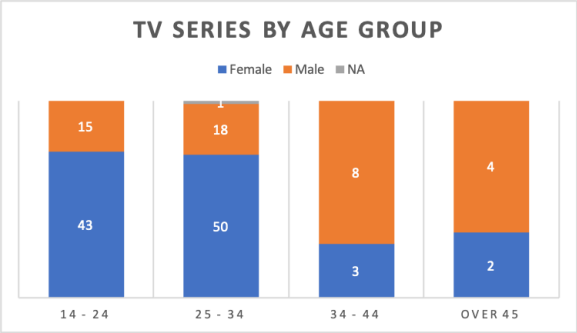

Figure 13: Preferences for TV series by age group (Source: personal elaboration)

By analyzing gaming habits, more than half of the respondents play every day (61%). Then, summing up the answers at the question "Can you estimate the time you spend playing in a week? (Hours)", it results 1.484 hours that, divided by the number of people who prefer video games to TV series (101) results in an average of almost 15 hours per week. Figure 14 shows the weekly gaming habits of the respondents, coming from the answers at the questions: "How many times a week do you play video games?".

This last data is in line with the gaming habits exposed in Chapter 3 (Marketing Charts, 2021; Statista 2021). The composition of the sample with reference to the questionnaire side about video games, is skewed towards a higher concentration of males (data coming from the market indicate that gamers subdivision by gender is almost equal – Statista, 2021). This can be justified by the small numerosity of the sample.

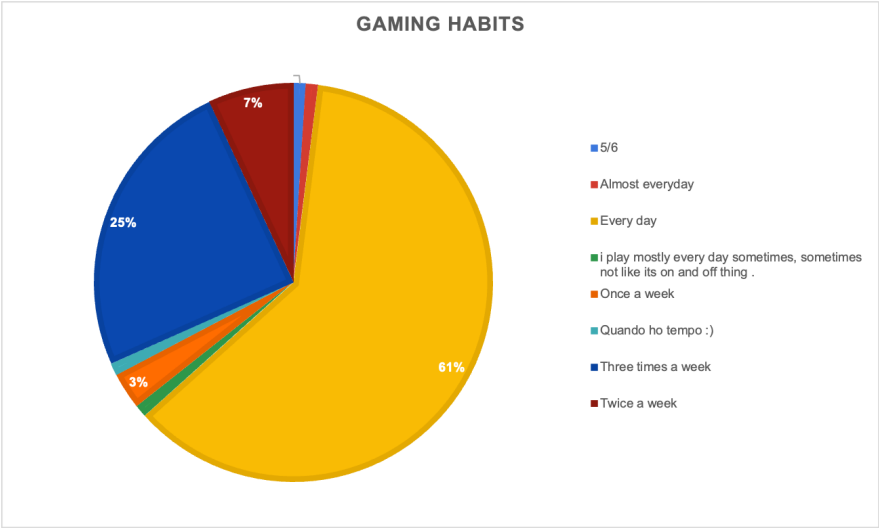

Figure 14: Gaming habits in percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

Awareness about product placement

Following the structure of the questionnaire, after the profiling section, the first investigated aspect is the awareness about product placement marketing strategy.

The questionnaire asked directly to interviewed people if they know what is product placement. At this question, 80% of all the respondents confirm their knowledge. Then a definition of the practice is provided. Solely at gamers have been asked if they are aware about this practice in video games: the 90% confirm. Subsequently people were asked if they have never noticed product placement in video games or TV series. On the video games side of the questionnaire, the 61% of the people who know what is product placement have also noticed some of it while playing (Table 3). Similarly, among TV series passionate, 67% of the people aware about the practice have seen some kind of product placement while watching TV series (Table 4).

To make some hypothesis about why people don't know what is product placement, the answers at the question "Which is your favorite video game?" have been analyzed. Two people have answered FIFA Collection: the same people have stated that they were not aware about the practice, but then they confirm to have seen some product placement in their favorite video game. This can highlight how in this category of games collaborations and sponsorships are not intended as a pure kind of advertising, but more as an essential element for the reproduction of reality. The importance of the category of games will be analyzed later in this paragraph.

Given that product placement in TV series is a daily occurrence, for this part of the questionnaire we suppose that people affirm to not be aware about the practice because they are used to see brands, at the point where they don't question the fact.

		Have you ever noticed some product placement in your favorite video game?		
		No	Yes	Total
Do you know what is "product placement"?	No	6	6	12
	Yes	27	62	89
	Total	33	68	101

		Have you ever noticed some product placement in your favorite video game?		
		No	Yes	Total
Do you know what is "product placement"?	No	6%	6%	12%
	Yes	27%	61%	88%
	Total	33%	67%	100%

Table 3: Awareness about product placement in video games in numbers and percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

		Have you ever noticed some product placement in TV series?		
		No	Yes	Total
Do you know what is "product placement"?	No	12	24	36
	Yes	11	97	108
	Total	23	121	144

		Have you ever noticed some product placement in TV series?		
		No	Yes	Total
Do you know what is "product placement"?	No	8%	17%	25%
	Yes	8%	67%	75%
	Total	16%	84%	100%

Table 4: Awareness about product placement in TV series in numbers and percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

Level of focus

An aspect that follows the awareness about this kind of marketing strategy, is the attention that people put in recognizing products and brands in the gaming environment or what they are watching.

People who completed the questionnaire were asked to express their opinion about various sentences on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statement which investigated the attention was "I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the video game I am playing". Table 5 compares the answers about the attention with the preferences about explicit/non explicit products in the game, subdivided among who know and don't know what product placement is. The majority (60%) of gamers don't pay attention to the brands inserted in the video game while they are playing (strongly disagree or disagree with the sentence). This can be connected to the interactive and immersive nature of video games: when you are playing the focus is primarily on the goal to be reached or what the subject is doing. Then, who knows what is product placement prefer to see explicit brands/products; on the contrary, who don't know what is product placement is basically indifferent. This data will be further investigated later in this paragraph when analyzing the interest that product placement can generate in players.

Proposing the same analysis on data coming from the TV series side of the questionnaire (Table 6), it emerges that 44% of the respondents don't pay attention, and a large part is indifferent (29%) against the products or brands inserted in the TV series they are watching. This data could be explained by the nature of TV series: a mature market for product placement (it is largely used for a long time) where people is not surprised from it. Another reason could the

static experience provided by this medium: you can watch a series without watching it, but just by listening to it and look at some scenes.

	Do you know what is product placement? Yes-No Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I prefer when brands or products are not explicit in the game" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)														
		No					Total (no)	Yes					Total (yes)	Total	
		1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5			%
Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the video game I am playing" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	1				1		1	5		7	2	5	19	20	20%
	2			2	1	1	4	1	11	12	5	7	36	40	40%
	3		2	4	1		7	2	6	3	2	3	16	23	23%
	4						0	2	4	4	2	1	13	13	13%
	5						0		2		2	1	5	5	5%
	Total	0	2	6	3	1	12	10	23	26	13	17	89	101	
	%	0%	17%	50%	25%	8%	100%	11%	26%	29%	15%	19%	100%		100%

Table 5: Level of attention paid to brands/products inserted in video games (Source: personal elaboration)

	Do you know what is product placement? Yes-No Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I prefer when brands or products are not explicit in the TV series" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)														
		No					Total (no)	Yes					Total (yes)	Total	
		1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5			%
Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the TV series i am watching" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	1	2		1	2	1	6	2		7	2	2	13	19	13%
	2	1	2	6	2	2	13	2	5	12	8	5	32	45	31%
	3	1	1	6	1	1	10		9	10	12	1	32	42	29%
	4			3		1	4	5	5	9	2	4	25	29	20%
	5				1	2	3		1	4	1		6	9	6%
	Total	4	3	16	6	7	36	9	20	42	25	12	108	144	
	%	11%	8%	44%	17%	19%	100%	8%	19%	39%	23%	11%	100%		100%

Table 6: Level of attention paid to brands/products inserted in TV series (Source: personal elaboration)

Data just exposed, allow to answer at the second question which underlie at the construction of the questionnaire: "Do gamers remember and pay more or less attention to the products/brands they see in video games with respect to TV series viewers?". Generally, gamers pay less attention, but this is in line with video game intrinsic characteristics. It doesn't mean that the insertion of brands and products in a game is not a good strategy: additional elements need to be analyzed.

Intrusiveness level

The possible intrusiveness of product placement has been investigated with a direct question (Table 7): is product placement a practice which interfere with the gaming experience or not? The majority of gamers (67%) said "no". 23% answered "it depends", and the main listed causes are:

- The consistency with the kind of game and the game storyline
- The invasiveness in the gameplay

- The opportunity to interact with the placement

These elements must be taken into account by companies' marketers at the time when they have to define the strategy.

Looking at Table 7 from the other perspective, most of the gamers also agree or strongly agree about the fact that the insertion of everyday life product in a video game make it more real (40%).

By analyzing the same phenomenon but with refence to TV series (Table 8), it seems that even in this case respondents mostly agree on the fact that it does not interfere with the watching experience (59%). As gamers, TV series passionate agree about that the insertion of everyday products in a TV series make it more real.

	Generally speaking, do you think that product placement interferes with the game experience?					
		It depends	No	Yes	Total	%
Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I think that the insertion of everyday life product in the game make it more real" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	1	4	7	2	13	13%
	2	2	10	1	13	13%
	3	10	23	2	35	35%
	4	5	20	2	27	27%
	5	2	8	3	13	13%
	Total	23	68	10	101	
	%	23%	67%	10%	100%	100%

Table 7: Perception of the insertion of real products/brands in video games and interference with the gaming experience (Source: personal elaboration)

	Generally speaking, do you think that product placement interferes with the watching experience?					
		It depends	No	Yes	Total	%
Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I think that the insertion of everyday life product in the TV series make it more real" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	1	4	4		8	6%
	2	4	10	4	18	13%
	3	13	31	7	51	35%
	4	14	30	8	52	36%
	5	3	10	2	15	10%
	Total	38	85	21	144	
	%	26%	59%	15%	100%	100%

Table 8: Perception of the insertion of real products/brands in TV series and interference with the watching experience (Source: personal elaboration)

Whether product placement interferes or not with the gaming experience is then related to the kind of game and the associated level of attention placed in the gameplay. As it also emerged from the interviews, interactivity and engagement are two key elements which differentiate video games from TV series. The way in which the questionnaire has been distributed (not in a controlled situation), make it difficult to measure the attention and engagement of a person in

the gameplay. For this reason, at respondents were asked which, in their opinion, are the kinds of game more suitable for the insertion of product placements, and answers have been analyzed in comparison with the preferences at the sentence "I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the video game I am playing". People can express their thinking by selecting the options from a list which included: racing, sport, simulation, shooter, fighting, strategy, platform, role-playing and all the previous. Considering that in this latter case answers are multiplicated because it was possible to select several alternatives, some trends emerged from the comparison. Looking at Table 9, with reference to games where product placements are commonplace (racing, sport, simulation), people mostly disagree with the proposed sentence. There is, instead, a higher attention in strategy, role-playing, shooter, and fighting games (in decreasing order), even if it has been proved that gamers are basically indifferent to products and brands. Highly engaging games which require to the gamer a strong focus on the actions to be taken, lead to little attention to the surrounding of the gameplay, and so little recognition of the placement (Ip 2009). This highlights that a video games market share, specifically that of video games which primarily reproduce real-life situations, is composed by players which are accustomed to see real brands in the gameplay or, at least, they are not annoyed by them. We can consider these kinds of game more mature with reference to the insertion of product placements. Other categories of games far from the reproduction of the reality are, instead, maybe less suitable to the insertion of products or brands and, for this reason, companies have to be more careful and they need to have a greater sensitivity when approaching these games.

Express your opnion about the following sentence: "I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the video game I am playing" (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)						
	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Racing	16	31	17	9	3	76
%	21%	41%	22%	12%	4%	100%
Sport	15	32	17	10	2	76
%	20%	42%	22%	13%	3%	100%
Simulation	7	17	9	7	2	42
%	17%	40%	21%	17%	5%	100%
Shooter	3	7	6	3	2	21
%	14%	33%	29%	14%	10%	100%
Fighting	2	6	5	3	2	18
%	11%	33%	28%	17%	11%	100%
Strategy	1	3	5	2	2	13
%	8%	23%	38%	15%	15%	100%
Platform		1	1	1		3
%	0%	33%	33%	33%	0%	100%
Role-playing	2	7	7	3	2	21
%	10%	33%	33%	14%	10%	100%

Table 9: Percentages of the level of attention for each kind of game (Source: personal elaboration)

As stated few lines above, the level of attention and involvement can also interfere with brand recall. Among people who answered "no" or "it depends" at the query about the intrusiveness of product placement in the gaming experience, respectively the 40% and the 66% recall the brands they have seen while playing. The same holds true for TV series: the 40% (answer "no") and the 66% (answer "it depends") recall the brands.

An element which in turn interferes with brand recall is the kind of placement: as it is possible to see from Table 10, with reference to video games the most remembered kind of placement is "Brands mentioned/used by the character" (40%), immediately followed by "I just remember it was there" (29%). This leads back to the interactive and immersive experience offered by video games: it is least likely that you don't remember a brand/product used or mentioned by the character you are impersonating, instead a brand placed in the background need to strongly hit the attention in order to be remembered. As a confirmation of gamers' opinion about the fact that product placement does not interfere with the gaming experience, in Table 12 it is possible to see that gamers are largely indifferent (78%) when evaluation their experience after the exposure to the placement, regardless of the kind.

The same assumptions hold true for TV series (Table 11), where the 31% recall the brands/products used or mentioned by the main character, and another 30% just recall to have seen a placement. Again, TV series watchers are indifferent when evaluating their exposure to the product placement (Table 13).

The second place of the ranking, occupied by the generic reminder of a placement, can be justified by the fact that the questionnaire has not been done in a controlled environment after, for example, a specific gameplay or watching. Every person has filled the questionnaire in a different moment and for this reason it is not possible to know how long it has been from the exposure to the product placement.

	Do you recall the brand/brands?			
Kind of placement	No	Yes	**Total**	%
Billboard in the background	7	7	14	14%
Brands mentioned/used by the characters while playing	16	24	40	40%
I just remember it was there	28	1	29	29%
Object in the background	4	6	10	10%
Object in the foreground	4	4	8	8%
Total	**59**	**42**	**101**	**100%**

Table 10: Kinds of placement in video games remembered by respondents in percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

	Do you recall the brand/brands?			
Kind of placement	No	Yes	**Total**	%
Billboard in the background	2		2	1%
Brands mentioned/used by the characters while playing	13	31	44	31%
I just remember it was there	31	12	43	30%
Object in the background	20	4	24	17%
Object in the foreground	9	22	31	22%
Total	**75**	**69**	**144**	**100%**

Table 11: Kinds of placement in TV series remembered by the respondents in percentages (Source: personal elaboration)

Did the product placement positively or negatively affect your gaming experience?				
	Indifferent	**Negatively**	**Positively**	**Total**
Billboard in the background	10	3	1	14
Brands mentioned/used by the characters while playing	30	2	8	40
I just remember it was there	24	1	4	29
Object in the background	8	1	1	10
Object in the foreground	7		1	8
Total	**79**	**7**	**15**	**101**
%	78%	7%	15%	100%

Table 12: Percentages about how the kind of placement affected the gaming experience (Source: personal elaboration)

Did the product placement positively or negatively affect your watching experience?				
	Indifferent	**Negatively**	**Positively**	**Total**
Billboard in the background	2			2
Brands mentioned/used by the characters while playing	30	3	11	44
I just remember it was there	35	1	7	43
Object in the background	19	4	1	24
Object in the foreground	24		7	31
Total	**110**	**8**	**26**	**144**
%	76%	6%	18%	100%

Table 13: Percentages about how the kind of placement affected the watching experience (Source: personal elaboration)

The kind of placement not only affects the experience, but it can also influence people's opinion about the brands/products and/or the video game or TV series themselves. As mentioned above, generally speaking product placement does not interfere with the gaming experience (just 10% think that it is a distraction for the gameplay). Among the people who answered "it does not interfere", just the 15% reconsider their opinion about the brand after the view of the product placement, and only 10% reconsider their opinion about the video game (Figure 15). People are

slightly higher adverse towards the brand, a signal that a person who is loyal to the video game hardly would be affected by a placement.

The same applies for TV series: 16% of the respondents changed their mind towards the brand, and just the 9% towards the TV series (Figure 16). Both in case of video games and TV series, passionate of a specific title rarely change their mind.

What is possible to highlights here is that gamers are as sensitive as TV series watchers, and that, as a consequence, companies may obtain from this marketing method the same results obtainable from a consolidated strategy.

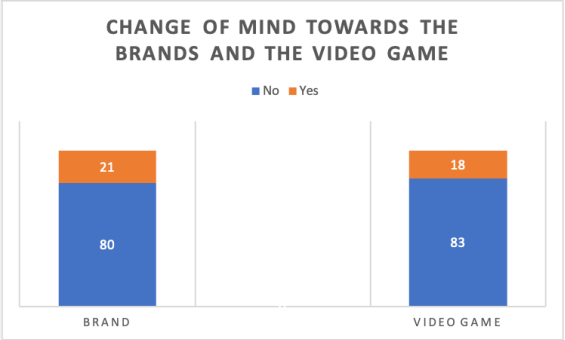

Figure 15: Change of mind (in number of responses) after the exposure to product placement towards the brands and the video game (Source: personal elaboration)

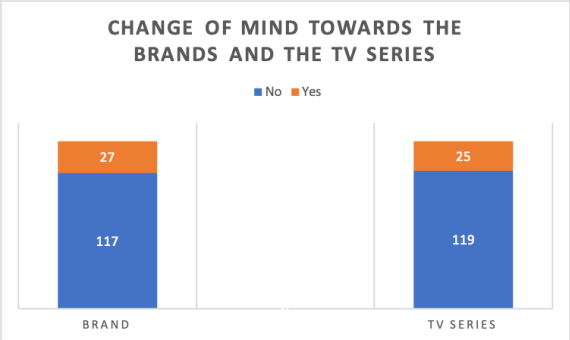

Figure 16: Change of mind (in number of responses) after the exposure to product placement towards the brands and the TV series (Source: personal elaboration)

Product placement effects

Brand recall is important, but for marketers it does also matter how much word of mouth and user generated contents can be caused from a product placement strategy.

For both video games and TV series the 20% of the respondents declared that their interest in a brand increase if they see it while they are playing or watching. This connects to a sense of curiosity and seek for additional information. When people see a brand that they don't know, the 45% of gamers sometimes search or search for more information (Table 14). Tv series watchers seems to be less curious: just 9 people (8%) out of 108 (people aware about product placement) searches for more information when they see a brand that they don't know (Table 15).

		If you notice a brand in the game you are playing, do you usually search for more information?				
		No	Sometimes	Yes	Total	
Do you know what is product placement?	No	4	5	3	12	12%
	Yes	52	27	10	89	88%
	Total	56	32	13	101	
	%	55%	32%	13%	100%	100%

Table 14: Percentages of respondents who researched for new information after the exposure to a new brand/product in video games (Source: personal elaboration)

		If you notice a brand in a TV series you are whatching, do you usually search for more information?				
		No	Sometimes	Yes	Total	
Do you know what is product placement?	No	22	12	2	36	25%
	Yes	64	35	9	108	75%
	Total	86	47	11	144	
	%	60%	33%	8%	100%	100%

Table 15: Percentages of respondents who researched for new information after the exposure to a new brand/product in TV series (Source: personal elaboration)

Additional information can be, for example, searched online but also through friends. A specific question has been posed: "Did you talk about the placement you see with friends?". The 35% of gamers who noticed product placements in video games (24 out of 68 – Table 16) talked with friends, and just the 20% (25 out of 121 – Table 17) of respondents done the same with reference to TV series.

Product placement in video games can generate some kind of stir, so people tent to generate word of mouth. The fact of seeing a real product in a TV series is just part of it, and maybe people who talk with friends about a placement do it because it is a strange one (for example Starbucks in Games of Thrones).

		Did you talk about the placement you see with friends?			
		No	Yes	Total	%
Have you ever noticed some product placement in your favorite video game?	No	28	5	33	33%
	Yes	44	24	68	67%
	Total	72	29	101	
	%	71%	29%	100%	100%

Table 16: Percentages of respondents sharing information with friends about a placement in video games (Source: personal elaboration)

		Did you talk about the placement you see with friends?			
		No	**Yes**	**Total**	**%**
Have you ever noticed some product placement in TV series?	No	20	3	23	16%
	Yes	96	25	121	84%
	Total	**116**	**28**	**144**	
	%	81%	19%	100%	100%

Table 17: Percentages of respondents sharing information with friends about a placement in TV series (Source: personal elaboration)

4.3. Major findings

From the interviews and the data collected with the distribution of the questionnaire it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions, which can be summarized in 6 main points:

1. As it was possible to understand from literature in Chapter 2, product placement is a largely legitimized marketing strategy and data collected through this research confirm that people are mostly aware about the practice. This can be justified by the tendence to move quickly for an entertainment media to another.
2. As emerged from the interviews, video games are a medium which grants to reach a wide audience and, at the same time, they allow companies to target people specifically, and each game genre has its niche audience. The long-time exposure characteristic of this medium increases the possibility for companies' brands and products to be noticed and remembered.
3. Actually, gamers pay less attention to the placements with respect to TV series passionate, but this is not bad news. The immersive and interactive nature of video games results in a lower attention of players towards the particulars of the gameplay, but the long-time exposure comes to help. This is why, when defining the strategy, marketers need to carefully consider some elements like the consistency with the gameplay, the intrusiveness of the placement and the possibility of interaction with it. The strategy needs to be prepared largely in advance, in order to avoid simply mistakes. If the strategy is designed in the right way, because of the immersive and interactive nature of video games, it could lead to an even higher level of attention with respect to TV series and, finally, to better results.
4. The kind of game is crucial: different levels of attention pertain to each kind of game. If the player is largely engaged, he or she does not pay too much attention to gaming environment and, as a consequence, he or she will not be annoyed by the product placement. Data has proved that the games with the lower level of attention are mainly those games which reproduce real situations. Similarly, if the player notices the placement, he or she generally think that it does not interfere with the gaming experience. In this regard, it has been proved that even at distance of time, almost the 40% of gamers remember the placement, and up to the 70% remember the kind of placement.

The insertion of everyday life product is then related to the kind of game: they are largely preferred since they make the gaming experience more real, but marketers need to keep in mind the congruence between the game and the product or brand.

5. Intrusiveness is, anyway, a key aspect: the kind of placement is another element to carefully consider in defining the strategy. Precisely because video games are an immersive medium, gamers are more sensitive to intrusiveness with respect to TV series watchers, and the way in which products and brands are introduced in the gaming experience needs more observations from marketers. Gamers are, however, neither negatively nor positively affected by the kind of placement while playing, but it can influence people's opinion about both the brand and the video game.
6. Product placement in video games generate an interest in gamers, which search for more information (when they see a brand not known) and talk with friends more with respect to TV series. In addition, as stated in data about video games trends in Chapter 3, gamers create communities while playing: they play more and more online, and this means that they are all the time connected with other people. As a consequence, the exchange of views is immediate, and it does not happen in a later time as it can be with TV series. This is for companies a big plus and a higher possibility of generation of word of mouth and user generated contents.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to investigate the video game industry through people directly or indirectly interested in it, in an effort to collect data which define the precise area of product placement in video games as a new promising area of investments for companies and their brands.

The research has started from a literature review about the two involved topics, product placement and video games, in order to have a comprehensive theoretical view of the issue under investigation. Then some interviews have been done, and a questionnaire has been distributed to passionate. This latter has collected data on the front of product placement in video games and on product placement in TV series, in order to compare the first new promising marketing strategy with an already consolidated one. The final aim of the questionnaire has been to understand gamers' attitude towards product placement, if they are more or less sensitive compared to TV series watchers, and the level of attention paid to the insertion of products and/or brands in the gaming experience.

From interviews and data collected through the questionnaire it has been possible to define some key points, which allow to define the practice of product placement in video games a promising area of investments for companies.

First, video games allow companies to reach a wide audience and, at the same time, the characteristics of this media allow to define a strategy which target a very specific audience. Analysis of the collected data has shown a sample with gaming habits in line with the market: people play almost every day, with an average of 15 hours per week. The long-time exposure proper to this medium is an unquestionable advantage for companies at the time that they have to choose whether to include product placement strategy in video games in their IMC or not. A high level of awareness in the practice and the confirmation that it does not interfere with the gaming experience, diminishing then the potential doubts which can arise when evaluating the media. What it seems in contrast with the research question is the poor attention towards the brands and products inserted in video games, but this is not a bad signal. The mix of a good strategy design and the distinctive high degree of involvement and interaction proper of video games, can lead gamers to have an even higher attention with respect to TV series. This, in turn, may led them to unconsciously acquire information, indeed inserted products and brands are proved to be usually remembered even after a long time.

Second, a careful selection of the kind of game and placement is essential. It has been demonstrated that every kind of game encompasses a different level of attention and

engagement in the gameplay which, in turn, are reflected in the product placement and these can affect brand recall. But not only, even if it has been proved that gamers are not affected by the typology of placement, it can influence people's opinion about both the brand and the video game. The coherence between the game (the kind and the topic) and the products, the kind of placement and the possibility of interaction with it are the three main elements suggested by the respondents which a company have to take into consideration when defining the strategy.

Third, product placements in video games arise in gamers a higher interest with respect to the ones in TV series, which push them to talk with friends and search for more information when they don't know the brand. This is a very important source of word of mouth and user generated contents, some of the elements widely desired by marketers from an advertising campaign. These phenomena can be amplified if the habit of people to play more and more online is taken into consideration: word of mouth becomes an immediate reaction, and so sharing of information is contemporary to the gaming experience and not delayed like it happens with TV series.

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of the data coming from the interviews and the questionnaire seems to confirm the research question: product placement in video games can be considered a new promising area of investments. Evidences from the video games market support the popularity of this medium and they seem to be consistent with what has just been exposed. Product placement in video games is still little considered, it is an unexploited area with a huge peculiar potential audience which see it as a non-intrusive practice. It is possible to affirm that product placement in video games is following the path made by product placement in TV series. Even if TV series are still in a maturing phase, characterized by a constant issue of titles and watchers used to the features of the medium, video games offers a higher number of opportunities for companies. They are in a pre-maturation phase which allow to structure new innovative campaigns able to impress people, especially some early-adopters kinds of games.

Nevertheless, the observations resulting from the research and the research itself have some limits. First of all, the fact that games studies are a relatively new area of research and the scarce literature which investigate the phenomenon: few papers dealt with the subject, and they mainly focused on the effects of this kind of methodology and not on the opportunities for a company. Then, the sample is very small as opposed to the wide audience that can be reached with video games. Just a general analysis on the video games people plays, without a distinction based on the platform (like PC or console) has been carried out, even if it is an element which can influence the perception of the placement. Then, though gamers answered to be aware about

the practice of product placement, there isn't an objective way to verify if respondents really understand what it means. By analyzing respondents' favorite video games, it has emerged that they mainly play mainstream video games, like FIFA Collection, Fortnite, Call of Duty and other titles released or updated in recent years. These are innovative video games: think for example at the astonishing success of the Battle Royal gameplay in Fortnite, then replicated in other video games. The innovative feature and the large gaming audience make this kind of games early adopters for product placement.

A suggestion for further researches is therefore to deeply investigate the relationship among product placement and each kind of game, in order to better understand the variety which best suits the practice. New online gaming platforms are a trend which is substantially growing, and which will require researchers' attention in the near future. "Metaverso" has not been approached in this dissertation because it is still at the beginning of its evolution but, as online platforms, it will probably develop at a fast pace in the next months, and companies can't miss this opportunity because of a lack of knowledge. Another interesting relationship to be investigated could be related to the industries which most employ product placement, and understand how it can be adapted to the video game world. Another research method can, finally, be suggested: even if questionnaires are a simple and quick way to collect data, an empirical study with a control group and the use of statistical programs to analyze data could results in more insightful results.

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

Questionnaire about..

Hello! My name is Beatrice, and this questionnaire will help me to collect data for my thesis as a conclusion of my master degree in Innovation and Marketing at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice.
I don't want to tell you the subject of the questionnaire here because your answers should be spontaneous.
Completing the questionnaire will take you a maximum of 5 minutes and, if you want, you can share it with friends, I would appreciate it!
Thank you! Beatrice

***Campo obbligatorio**

1. Gender *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Male**
- **Female**
- **Prefer not to say**

2. Age *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **14 - 24**
- **25 - 34**
- **34 - 44**
- **Over 45**

3. Actual employment *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **High school student**
- **University student**
- **Entrepeneur**
- **Employed person**
- **Unemployed**

4. Where are you from? (country) *

5. Do you prefer playing video games or watching Tv series? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Video Games** *Passa alla domanda 6.*
- **Tv Series** *Passa alla domanda 35.*

Video Games

6. How many times a week do you play videogames? (Both console and/or computer) *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Once a week**
- **Twice a week**
- **Three times a week**
- **Every day**
- **Altro:** _____

7. Can you estimate the time you spend playing in a week? (hours) *

8. Which is your favorite video game? *

9. List other video games you like to play (max 3) *

Product Placement background - Video Games

10. Do you know what is "product placement"? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

Product Placement

It is the practice of introducing in movies, television, music, videos, video games and so on, some elements which recall the visual identity of a known brand, or the branded product itself, in order to influence the audience's future choices. You can't skip product placements, but it is NOT an advertising interruption (e.g. advertising between tv programs) because products or brands are inserted in the plot or they are used/mentioned by the characters.

11. Are you aware about the product placement practice in videogames? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

12. Have you ever noticed some product placement in your favorite video game? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

13. Do you recall the brand/brands? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

14. If YES, which brand was it?

15. How obvious the product placement was? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Unoticeable						**Very noticeable**

16. Do you remember which kind of product placement it was? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Billboard in the background**
- **Object in the foreground**
- **Object in the background**
- **Brands mentioned/used by the characters while playing**
- **I just remember it was there**

17. Did the product placement positively or negatively affect your gaming experience? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Positively**
- **Negatively**
- **Indifferent**

18. Did you talk about the placement you see with your friends? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

19. List other brands (max 5) you have seen while playing video games (Example: Mercedes - Mario Kart 8) *

20. Generally speaking, do you think that product placement interfere with the game experience? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **It depends**

21. If you answered "it depends", does it depend on what?

22. After you realized you were in front of a product placement, did your opinion about the VIDEO GAME change? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**

23. After you realized you were in front of a product placement, did your opinion about the BRAND change? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**

24. If you notice a brand in the video game you are playing, do you usually search for more information if you don't know it well? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **Sometimes**

25. Which kinds of games do you think are more suitable for the insertion of product placements?

Seleziona tutte le voci applicabili.

- [ ] **Racing**
- [ ] **Sport**
- [ ] **Simulation**
- [ ] **Shooter**
- [ ] **Fighting**
- [ ] **Strategy**
- [ ] **Platform**
- [ ] **Role-playing**
- [ ] **All**
- [ ]

Express your opinion about the following sentences:

26. I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the video game I am playing *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

27. I prefer when brands or products are not explicit in the game *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

28. I think that the insertion of everyday life products in the game make it more real
* *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

29. My interest in a brand increase when I see it while I am playing a video game *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

30. I clearly recall the product I saw in a video game while I am making a purchase

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

31. I usually buy products that I saw in a video game

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

TV Series

32. How many times a week do you watch TV series? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- ◯ **Once a week**
- ◯ **Twice a week**
- ◯ **Three times a week**
- ◯ **Every day**
- ◯ **Altro:** _____

33. Can you estimate the time you spend watching TV series in a week? (hours) *

34. Which is your favorite platform? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- ◯ **Netflix**
- ◯ **Amazon Prime**
- ◯ **Disney Plus**
- ◯ **Others**

35. Which is your favorite TV series? *

36. List your TOP 5 TV series *

Product Placement background - TV Series

37. Do you know what is "product placement"? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- ◯ **Yes**
- ◯ **No**

Product Placement

It is the practice of introducing in movies, television, music, videos, video games and so on, some elements which recall the visual identity of a known brand, or the branded product itself, in order to influence the audience's future choices. You can't skip product placements, but it is NOT an advertising interruption (e.g. advertising between tv programs) because products or brands are inserted in the plot or they are used/mentioned by the characters

38. Have you ever noticed some product placement in TV series? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

39. Do you recall the brand/brands? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

40. If YES, which brand was it?

41. How obvious the product placement was? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Unoticeable						**Very noticeable**

42. Do you remember which kind of product placement it was? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Billboard in the background**
- **Object in the foreground**
- **Object in the background**
- **Brands mentioned/used by the characters**
- **I just remember it was there**

43. Did the product placement positively or negatively affect your watching experience? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Positively**
- **Negatively**
- **Indifferent**

44. Did you talk about the placement you see with your friends? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**

45. List other brands (max 10) you have seen while seeing your favorites TV series (Example: The Big Bang Theory - Alienware Notebook)

46. Generally speaking, do you think that product placement interferes with the watching experience? *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **It depends**

47. If you answered "it depends", does it depend on what?

48. After you realized you were in front of a product placement, did your opinion about the TV SERIES change? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**

49. After you realized you were in front of a product placement, did your opinion about the BRAND change? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**

50. If you notice a brand in the TV series you are watching, do you usually search for more information if you don't know it well? * *Contrassegna solo un ovale.*

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **Sometimes**

Express your opinion about the following sentences:

51. I pay attention to the brands/products inserted in the Tv series I am watching *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree						**Strongly agree**

52. I prefer when brands or products are not explicit in the Tv Series *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

53. I thing that the insertion of every day life products in the Tv series made it more real *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

54. My interest in a brand increase when I see it while I am watching a TV series *

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

55. I clearly recall the product I saw in a tv Series while I am making a purchase

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

56. I usually buy products that I saw in a Tv Series

Contrassegna solo un ovale.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	**Strongly agree**

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