

## MEDIA

## ADVERTISING

Stuart Elliott

## It's a Game. No, It's an Ad. No, It's Advergame.

**T**HE online games that were embedded in ads sponsored by the Internet travel agent Orbitz are coming back, this time on a Web site of their own.

The Web site (orbitzgames.com), scheduled to go live today, revives games that have proved popular since they began appearing inside Orbitz online ads in 2001. Fans of the frivolous may once again use their PC's to play Sink the Putt and Swing for the Fences, as well as try new ones like Island Hop.

The Web site includes features not previously found in the online ad games. For instance, players can create characters to use as personas for playing the games, complete with screen names and funny hats, and they can also find out about other people playing the games they want to play.

The games and Web site, created by an agency in Chicago named 15 Letters, are the centerpiece of a promotional campaign for Orbitz offering free travel prizes. The budget is estimated in the low seven figures.

The Web site includes elements of the mainstream advertising campaign for Orbitz like a cameo role for the game show host Wink Martindale, who appears in commercials for Orbitz created by the Chicago office of Young & Rubicam, part of the

Young & Rubicam Brands division of the WPP Group. Visitors to the orbitzgames.com site will be able to send "Wink-o-gram" e-mail messages.

The comeback of the Orbitz games is indicative of a trend known as advergame, in which marketers offer games online that double as ads — or vice versa, depending on your perspective — to capitalize on the growing interest among computer users in so-called casual gaming, playing short games whether brain teasers or time fillers.

The goal of advergame is to encourage consumers to engage in a branded experience — that is, spend time voluntarily with an ad. That is usually more efficient and effective for a marketer than to chase after consumers with ads they are likely to shun. Among the other brands that have added sponsored online games to their marketing tactics are Jeep and Life Savers.

One "huge risk" in advergame is that sponsors may "become better known for the games" than for their products or services, said Henry Harteveldt, an analyst who is the vice president for travel research at Forrester Research. Orbitz provided Mr. Harteveldt an advance look at the Web site so that he could discuss it with a reporter.

Advergame that is done well "strikes a good balance between being creative and different," Mr. Harteveldt said, "and making sure people know who's behind it." He praised Orbitz for making "the brand part of the U.R.L.," or Web address; by contrast, some advertisers offer games under names like the Life Savers Web site, called candystand.com.

Orbitz executives have been mulling for some time ways to give computer users regular access to its online games. They first appeared in the form of what are called pop-under ads, that is, banner ads that turn up on a computer screen after a Web site is visited. Many computer users consider such ads annoying and have installed blockers that screen out pop-up ads and their counterparts, pop-up ads.

Still, "when people find out you work at Orbitz, they want to talk to you about the games," said Mitch Truwit, chief executive of Orbitz in Chicago, part of the Cendant Corporation, "and they call us up to ask where they can find Sink the Putt."

Research by Orbitz shows that computer users spend an average of 3.5 minutes playing each game, Mr. Truwit said, and in the last year they have sent more than 1.8 million "tell a friend" e-mail messages recommending the games to others.

"One out of two people who buy travel online say they also play games online," he added, "and one out of three say they're familiar with the Orbitz games."

The idea to devote a Web site to advergame came from Randy Wagner, who joined Orbitz in May as chief marketing officer after working on global marketing at McDonald's.

"My nephew in college said he spent 20 minutes looking for Sink the Putt," Ms. Wagner said, "a game he was going to play for 3 minutes." Research into the Web site included "sending some of my brand team to a law firm in Chicago," she added, whose employees had organized intramural Sink the Putt tournaments.

"Why would a company dedicated to travel have a game site?" Ms. Wagner asked rhetorically. "Because travel today is a game and we want people to know Orbitz is the way to win that game."

Mr. Harteveldt said he also liked the Orbitz decision to mix in travel-themed games with more generic sports-oriented ones. The travel-related titles include Run for Your Flight and Pick Your Path.

Staff members of 15 Letters have been working on the Orbitz game ads since their debut, when they worked for another interactive agency in Chicago, Otherwise.

"People say they hate pop-under or pop-up ads," said Mark Rattin, president and creative director at 15 Letters. "Our challenge was figuring out how to make people love them."

After what he described as "a lot of experimentation," the first game ad went up, called Pluck the Chicken. Pulling out the feathers yielded a golden egg, and a click on the egg took computer users to Orbitz.com.

That had "three times the interaction" of pop-under ads without games, Mr. Rattin recalled, so the advergame began in earnest. The golf game remains the most popular, he added.

Ideas for new games come from many sources, Mr. Rattin said, de-

Island Hop is a game offered by Orbitz on its new Web site. The game has proved popular with both men and women.

scribing one's genesis: "We were in a meeting here talking about the concept of Orbitz making it easier to find the travel you want. Someone said, 'As easy as shooting fish in a barrel' — the inspiration for a new game, Fish in a Barrel.

Research shows that online game-playing is becoming as popular with women as it is with men, Mr. Rattin

said, which is important because Orbitz seeks to appeal to both sexes. "Women tend to play more puzzle-oriented games," he added, while men generally prefer "shoot-'em-ups."

Ms. Wagner said she already picked her screen name on the Web site, during its test phase: "Brand Goddess."

## ADDENDA

## Interpublic Proxy to Include Proposal to Sell Company

The Interpublic Group of Companies in New York said yesterday that it would place a shareholder proposal to sell the company on the proxy for the 2005 annual meeting, after the Securities and Exchange Commission denied a request by the company to exclude the plan.

The proposal was submitted by an owner of 300 shares of Interpublic stock, Charles Miller, who has placed similar proposals on the proxies of other companies in which he owns shares. In a statement, Interpublic said that it believed that the "best current course of action" to maximize shareholder value "continues to

be resolving financial reporting issues and improving operating performance."

The reference was to problems in internal controls that led Interpublic to postpone the release of the last six quarters of financial data. The proxy is scheduled to be released around Oct. 7, assuming that Interpublic meets a goal, which it reiterated last week, to release the data by Sept. 30.

In a report yesterday, Lauren Rich Fine, the advertising analyst for Merrill Lynch, wrote that she believed that "a sale of the company does not make sense" for reasons that included her doubt that Interpublic could be sold for a price "above or equal" to where its stock is trading. Interpublic shares closed yesterday at \$11.06, up 1 cent.

## Times Company Announces 500 Job Cuts

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

The New York Times Company announced yesterday that it would cut its work force by 500 employees, including 45 in The Times's newsroom and 35 in the newsroom of The Boston Globe.

The announcement came on the same day that Knight Ridder said it was cutting 100 editorial employees in Philadelphia: 75 from the newsroom at The Philadelphia Inquirer and 25 from The Philadelphia Daily News.

earnings to be lower than analysts predicted. The company said it expected earnings of 11 cents to 14 cents a share. Analysts had predicted 25 cents a share, according to Thomson First Call. Even that was well below the 33 cents a share the company earned last year.

Ms. Mathis said the analysts' estimates largely excluded the costs associated with the job cuts earlier this year. Those costs, which were \$12 million to \$14 million, were higher because more people took the

won't get them all through buyouts," he said, adding that except for a handful of layoffs last year, he could not remember any layoffs at the paper in his 29 years there.

Three years ago, he said, the paper had hired 52 young reporters as part of an expansion into the suburbs. Now, he said, those people in their 20's and 30's would be the ones laid off after older people take the buyouts. He said this would hurt the paper further because the younger employees not only were less expen-