

Physicians attack 'ads' in video games

Arcade amusements use simulated signs for alcohol, smokes

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If you drop your coins in the slot of the arcade game Super Monaco GP, you'll find yourself in a computerized race car, speeding through the streets of Monaco, complete with simulated Marlboro banners flashing overhead.

The action is designed to raise the pulse of video game players at arcade centers in Rhode Island and throughout the country.

But Super Monaco's plugs for

Marlboro cigarettes have also raised the blood pressure of DOC, an Atlanta-based physicians' group that fights tobacco and liquor promotions aimed at minors.

DOC (which stands for Doctors Ought to Care) says its survey of arcades in three states "found numerous examples of alcohol and tobacco products in video arcade games." It's the latest example of how tobacco and liquor companies promote their products to minors, according to the Atlanta-based organization.

"The tobacco and alcohol marketers both know that the best way to get a loyal customer is to get them young," said Dr. John W. Richards, DOC president. "Where is there a

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better place to market these things than in the video arcade, where there's almost no adult supervision and the kids are open to fantasy?"

Philip Morris, which makes Marlboro, says the DOC allegations are "absurd, misinformation and just absolutely wrong" because Philip Morris has told Sega, the manufacturer of Super Monaco GP, to stop all unauthorized use of the Marlboro logo.

"We would never grant permission to Sega or to any manufacturer to use our cigarette logos in any video game, especially those that are played by minors," said spokesman Steven H. Weiss. "All our cigarette advertising and promotions are directed at informed adult smokers only."

Sega, in a written statement by board co-chairman Dave Rosen, said the company is "already in the process of removing any graphics that could unintentionally be misconstrued as a real-life product in our games and packaging. We're doing this on our own volition, as well as at the request of Philip Morris."

Rosen said any cigarette or liquor references "are simply a game designer's innocent attempt to mimic real-life locations and scenery to enhance the realism of game play."

All of the games cited by DOC are racing simulations made by Sega.

Out Run has a Marlboro logo at the top of a starting pole. Power Drift has billboards for Budweiser. Hang On includes billboards for Marlboro and John Player Special, a brand of European cigarettes.

"A child playing Super Monaco GP is exposed to literally hundreds of Marlboro ads during a game, if he's good. If he's not good and doesn't reach 'extended play,' then he'll only see 50 or so Marlboro ads," said Richard.

Ironically, although public health officials say the nicotine in cigarettes is the country's most-abused drug, Super Monaco GP includes the public service warning: "Winners don't use drugs."

Some of the Sega games are available for home computers, but a spokeswoman for Mindscape, which distributes those home versions, said the cigarette logos have not been incorporated into those games.

Richards endorsed Sega's plan to recall the games. But he said the willingness of any company to plug a brand of tobacco or liquor, especially a company that caters to the youth market, is "beyond all ethical reasoning. No rational human being would try to encourage someone, much less a child, to become consumers of tobacco."

Philip Morris says it warned Sega about the alleged trademark in-

fringement in a Nov. 15 telephone call, after a Philip Morris lawyer saw Super Monaco GP in a New York City video arcade.

But Richards, who is also an associate clinical professor at the Medical College of Georgia, characterized the timing of the call as "real coincidental."

Richards said DOC informally complained about the practice on Nov. 8 to a staff member for Rep. Thomas A. Luken, D-Ohio. The staff member promised to ask Philip Morris about the practice. DOC filed a formal complaint to the Federal Trade Commission on Dec. 15; the FTC does not disclose what it is investigating.

Richards said that because the Sega games have copyright dates going back to 1985, "This has been going on for years and nobody noticed it."

Weiss said Philip Morris actively pursues all cases of trademark infringement.

But Richards said Philip Morris is apparently selective about which trademark infringements it pursues.

The company hasn't responded to past complaints about the Marlboro logo on toy race cars and candy cigarettes, he said.

Yet when DOC tried to sell T-shirts that spoofed Miller Lite beer as part of an attempt to discourage alcohol abuse, Richards said, Philip Morris sued to prevent the distribution of those "Killer Lite" shirts.