

# Game packaging adjusting on the fly

The relationship between videogames and their packaging has changed quite a lot over the years. It wasn't that long ago that there was real creativity put into product package design. Nowadays, a more uniform approach has been adopted by games producers, Darren Lock reports

**E**vidence of creating a total PC gaming experience through specialist packaging can be identified as far back as 1984 with the release of the classic BBC Micro game *Elite*, which was a groundbreaker that included maps and a novella, as well as the actual software media. The trend for creating unique packaging continued throughout the late 1980s and 1990s as computer gamers switched to the home PC to get their gaming fix. Companies such as Infocom specialised in adventure games and it was this genre that captured the imagination of the packagers with many

releases featuring a plethora of supplemental material. Infocom even played with the idea of 3D packaging for its *Suspended* adventure game that included a moulded plastic mask on its initial release that certainly stood out on the store shelves. Increasingly with these early games, the supplemental material was almost as important as the game itself. Sierra Online, a company that specialised in PC games, even managed to get a style of packaging named after it – the “Sierra box” was the most popular form of PC game packaging throughout the 1990s. It consisted of a large paperboard box that held the media and

manuals that slipped inside an outer dust jacket-style sleeve.

But while the packaging used in PC games grew increasingly larger, the trend was the opposite with the early console games. The console boom began in the early 1990s with the Sega Megadrive and Super Nintendo. While many PC games shared a uniform Sierra box packaging, console games were unique because  
*(Continued on page 22)*

**“As the industry is changing and margins stay fairly high, there is always room for new thoughts and ideas.” – Brigit Van Winkel**

*Halo 3 Legendary Edition* is one of the few console games recently released with special packaging





*(Continued from page 20)*

the manufacturers deliberately used packaging that made their games easily differentiated from their competitor. Sega used a polypropylene style case for its cartridges that could be compared to the Amaray DVD case we know today, while Nintendo took the ecologically-safe route and used paperboard packaging to hold its SNES and Gameboy game cartridges.

The Sony PlayStation was launched in 1995 and changed everything about video gaming. Not only did it use a CD-ROM instead of cartridge, but it was packaged in a stylish polypropylene carton based on the dimensions of an existing CD jewel case. However, it was

The *Halo 3* helmet is a true collector's item

sufficiently different and bore the PlayStation logo to differentiate it from audio CDs and any other software packaged in a jewel case.

In the late 1990s, the DVD-Video format was embraced by the gaming market with Sony's PlayStation2 being the first console to adopt DVD as a format. With DVD came the Amaray-style case that was already an early hit with DVD movies. It wasn't long before PC games manufacturers caught onto the change. In 2002, the Entertainment Merchants Association ditched the Sierra box and pushed for a standard packaging format, adopting the Amaray-style case. In recent years, we've seen all the major players in the console industry adopt variants of the Amaray case, and games packaging become rather homogeneous compared to its early years.

**“As soon as the gaming market gets saturated by supply, developers will have to stand out to target the right groups of people.”**

“If an industry is so used to using a specific type of packaging, it is very hard to change the standard,” said Brigit Van Winkel of Super Jewel Box. “There are too many parties involved to make an instant change...However, as the industry is changing and margins stay fairly high, there is always room for new thoughts and ideas.”

But with DVD cases becoming “de rigueur” for software publishing, the only way to distinguish between releases is a subtle color coding: Xbox 360 comes in a green case, Sony uses blue (to represent Blu-ray) for its PlayStation 3 software, and the Nintendo Wii is packaged in white. PC CD-ROM games come in standard black cases. Shelli Kaiser of Nexpak explains the reluctance for games publishers to move away from the Amaray-style packs: “Our company has been heavily involved in both console and PC game packaging. We have been at the forefront with all major console games packaging and our STACKpack case has become the product standard for PC-CD ROM games in the US. As with all new formats, we work directly with the content holders to define new packaging solutions. Many designs have their roots in existing packaging solutions but there are almost always some initiatives to create new branding that makes a particular format stand out at retail. Since the case is integral to the branding of a game (and very often the color of the case designates the console format), I believe that [the] Amaray case has a future in console games for years to come.”

Of course, there are some exceptions to the rule. Microsoft still occasionally puts out a limited edition version of its high profile releases for its Xbox 360 console, such as *Perfect Dark*

*Zero*, *Lost Planet* and the forthcoming *Halo 3: Perfect Dark Zero* and *Lost Planet* both adopted the SteelBook packaging from Scanavo, albeit in the standard DVD case style. "We do not think that games software will ever move away from the normal DVD case, as everything in the shops and stores is fitted to match the DVD case size standard," Kirska Eamanuelsen, of Scanavo's Steelbook division, said. "Furthermore, the consumer is very familiar with the product so therefore we think an expansion of the variety of DVD cases is a possibility for the future. We still sell a lot of limited editions and collectors items across the formats and we think that the trend will continue into the future."

The third episode of the *Halo* trilogy has a special version, called the *Halo 3 Legendary Edition*, that is quite unique in games packaging. The game will come with a life-sized plastic helmet and stand, echoing the visor worn by the main character in the game. The *Halo 3 Legendary* packaging is the exception to the rule, and it proves that marketing buzz and interest can be generated with a unique packaging concept.

While few videogame manufacturers are currently creating such special packaging, Van Winkel sees a future time when limited edition packaging might come back into fashion: "Apparently, specialist packaging doesn't really make sense at this point in time, otherwise there would be more releases like that. But as soon as the gaming market gets saturated by supply, game developers will have to stand out in order to target the right groups of people."

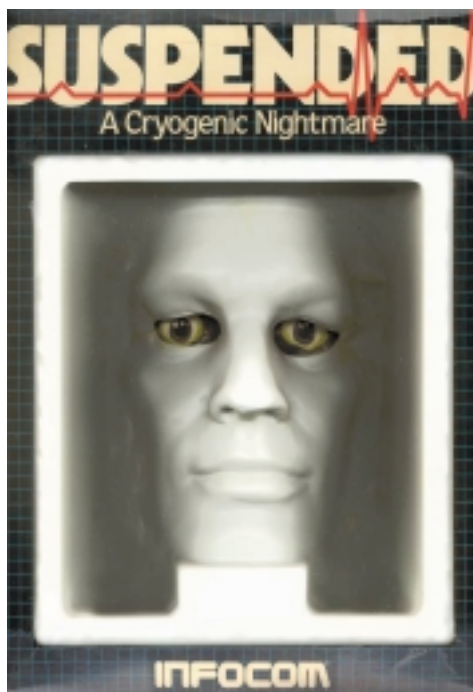
Another factor that could impact not only videogame packaging, but videogame packaged media as a whole, is downloading. "Downloadable is already emerging, as PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii all support it," said Simon Price, a videogame industry

analyst, as well as an advisor to International Development Group, a provider of market forecasting and analysis for the game industry. "Currently, only small games are available for download, in the order of tens of MB, although on PS3, larger games such as *Gran Turismo HD* have been available. The size of the hard drives on Xbox 360 and PS3 currently would not permit more than a few regular-sized games to be downloaded. And on Wii, SD cards are the only form of local storage. However, in the long term, it's likely that full games will be available for download – either late in this generation or almost certainly in the next (five-to-eight years)."

Special packaging, if videogame companies decide to pursue that route, could play a key role in keeping packaged media in the long term future of videogames. ●



*Lost Planet* is another Xbox title with special packaging



*Suspended's* moulded mask helped the game stand out on store shelves