

Story

## Phelps 'Game' For New Partnership

Laurie Sullivan, Dec 16, 2008 07:00 AM



It's still up in the air whether brand placements, sponsorships and advertisements will play any part in a new series of video games that gold medal Olympian Michael Phelps and 505 Games are co-developing.

With delivery of the first game scheduled to hit the streets in spring 2010, more than one year away, the two parties remain tight-lipped about such details.

505 Games, headquartered in Milton Keynes, U.K., has agreed to officially launch its Los Angeles-based division with the Phelps-branded games. The "multiple-title" series released across "multiple years" will run on Microsoft Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii and Sony PlayStation 3 consoles, along with the Apple iPhone platform. The series could also expand into expansion packs, according to Claudia Cavazza, brand manager for 505 Games and project manager for the Michael Phelps video game brand.

Product placements and both static and interactive ads inserted into the video games are options--providing another avenue for brands that want to connect to consumers through the gold medalists, Cavazza said. "We are discussing it with Octagon, Michael's agency, to see if he is open to that," she said. "Of course, if there is room for co-sponsorships we will explore it."

Jonathan Epstein, president and CEO of in-game advertising company Double Fusion, said brands support sports venues in the real world, so placing ads from "appropriate sponsors" in the suite of games would add to the realism.

"When you think of an icon like Michael Phelps, and what he represents in terms of the spirit of fairness, integrity and competition, he is the type of character brands are comfortable working with," Epstein said, whose company recently signed deals with THQ, Sega, Eidos and Midway to support ads in Sony PS3 games.

Cavazza, who will oversee the project, and 505 Games President Adam Kline approached Phelps' agent in August with the idea to create a suite of video games that will "transcend sports to attract more people to swimming."

505 Games will design the video game play base on Phelps' values. The game maker hopes to inspire people by focusing on active lifestyles, the spirit of competition and the dream of becoming a champion. Cavazza said 505 Games plans to build the games based on swimming themes, which agrees with branding experts such as Robert Passikoff, CEO of Brand Keys.

"Phelps is a nice guy, but the further you move him away from water, the less his values resonate with others," Passikoff said. "It's like the old joke. Would you buy a car from this guy? I'd buy a swimming pool," but wouldn't commit to playing and buying video games he endorses.

Phelps--a gamer himself, according to Cavazza--gets his game on with Activision's "Call of Duty." 505 Games and Phelps have agreed to donate a portion of each video game sold to the Michael Phelps Foundation. The titles may feature some of Phelps' Olympic teammates, too.