Television commercials last about 30 seconds; print ads are often seen for a fraction of that time.

But with a video game, potential consumers could be interacting with a product for seven to 10 minutes at a time.

That's why if you go on a major company's website, there's a good chance you'll find a video game hawking one of its products - keep the Filet-O-Fish sandwich away from the sharks, dunk as many Oreos as you can in a glass of milk, and smash through walls of ice for your Pepsi.

"It's a huge audience," says Dave Williams, general manager of Shockwave.com, which has developed 50 video game advertisements. "Businesses are asking, 'How can I get people interacting with my brand?' and there's probably no better way to do that than with a game."

The practice has shot off in the last few years, and industry watchers say they don't expect to see it diminish any time soon. According to a report by the Boston-based research group Yankee Group, $118 million was spent on advertising with video games in 2004 - and that figure is expected to top $800 million by 2009. These figures include both video games developed specifically for a product, known as "advergames," and product placement in established video games.

Advergames make sense to business as more consumers find other ways to spend their time besides watching TV and reading magazines and newspapers. This is especially true for the elusive 18- to 34-year-old male demographic. According to a report by Nielson Entertainment, this group spent more time in 2003 playing video games than watching prime-time TV - 30 billion hours' worth of playing.

Some products seem natural for video games - pretty much any vehicle, for
instance. Go to Jeep.com, and you find no less than 10 action games. Volkswagen boasts of the Touran's spaciousness with a game where you (in the form of soccer star David Beckham) kick soccer balls into the minivan.

But how do you make Pringles potato crisps exciting? Easy. You have giant cans of them roll down a slope at you while you try to leap over and dodge around them. That's the idea behind "King Kong Jump," a game that touts both the movie and the snack.

Even salad dressing can make for hours of gaming fun. When Sonic hired Shockwave to find a way to get its salad dressing on the minds of gamers, Williams says his company incorporated it into the existing "Diner Dash" - a game where players have to wait on several tables at once. Sonic's salad dressing shows up several times in the average game.

Unlike movie and television audiences wary of seeing advertising bleed into their entertainment, studies seem to indicate that gamers have no beef with product placement. They might even prefer it. Realism is a big plus for gamers and real-life products help in that respect.

Advertising watchdogs are, not surprisingly, less accepting of real products showing up in video games - especially junk food products.

"They're very effective, and I think that's a problem for children," says Susan Linn, assistant director of the Media Center for Children. "The marketing industry really likes these games; they call them `sticky' because kids spend more time on them than they would a 15-second commercial."

As the channels for advertising become more varied - besides video games, there's general online advertising and "viral marketing" - regulating marketing to kids becomes a lot trickier. J. Michael McGuinnis, who recently led a report for the National Academy of Sciences on food advertising's effects on children, says it might be more effective to work directly with the companies than pushing for government regulation.

"They're concerned about their images," he says of the companies. "So, from our perspective, we want to engage the companies to shift their marketing focus to healthier products."
McGinnis has been encouraged by a few steps in that direction. Kraft, Coca-Cola and Pepsi Co. have all announced that they plan to focus their marketing on more healthful products.

A discussion of this story with William Weir is slated to be shown on New England Cable News each hour today between 9 a.m. and noon.