

WHY GOOD GAMES GO BAD: EXPLORING CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT IN VIDEO
GAME COMMUNITIES

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines consumer perceptions of the engagement practices of the AAA video game industry, consumer perceptions of engagement with the AAA video game industry, and consumer perceptions of engagement with other consumers. Engagement is a strategic function encouraging organizational relationships with consumers. Though industries may develop approaches for engaging their consumers, these engagement practices may not match consumer perceptions and expectations., thus creating expectation gaps. Moreover, expectations of different consumer groups may be mutually exclusive. As industries continue to seek ways to engage consumers, engagement practices can present opportunities and risks.

The dissertation consists of three separate studies. Study One examines self-identified casual, average, and hardcore video game consumers' perceptions of ideal engagement with AAA publishers, attitudes toward publishers, the likelihood of engaging with AAA publishers, and their consumer behaviors. Study Two examines the promotional texts produced by AAA publishers and journalist critiques of three negatively-reviewed video games. These video games are Electronic Arts' *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), and, in collaboration with Sony Interactive Entertainment, Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2016). Qualitative analysis identifies issues evidenced in these texts in order to describe how engagement is enacted by publishers and how this engagement is evaluated by journalists. Finally, Study Three examines consumer-to-consumer conversations concerning the three negatively reviewed games on the social media platform Reddit.

Findings for Study One indicate gamer type plays a role in how respondents engage with and perceive the video game industry as well as how they perceive engagement with other

consumers. Study Two demonstrates how engagement strategies in promotional materials varied between the poorly-reviewed games. Journalistic critics referred to information in the promotional material to illustrate and evaluate publisher-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer engagement. Finally, Study Three produced insights into the contents of conversations between gamers on platform Reddit. The observed conversational themes contradicted journalist descriptions and evaluations of consumer-to-consumer engagement.

Overall, these three studies work together to contribute and extend engagement theory by helping researchers and practitioners alike understand how a presumably active consumer group, such as video game consumers, engage with businesses and other consumers.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The video game industry is a USD 137.9 billion industry supported through multiple different stakeholders (Sinclair, 2018a). Last year, the Entertainment Software Association estimated in its annual report that 67% of US households own at least one device that is used to play video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2017). However, some writers suggest what makes the video game industry rather unique compared with other industries is its consumer base, colloquially known as gamers. Journalists and academics assume that gamers differ from casual consumers of video games, and that gamers differ from even the most enthusiastic consumers in other industries (Behrenshausen, 2013; Shaw, 2010; D. Williams, 2003).

According to Shaw (2010) , “Video game scholars [tend] to write about the [gaming] culture from the inside, as many of them identify as gamers. Journalists, however, tend to write about video gaming from the outside” (p. 406). When describing the video game culture, the popular press often describes video game enthusiasts in pathological terms like “junkies,” “manic,” and even “infectious” (D. Williams, 2003). Moreover, gamers have been portrayed as having an insatiable need for innovation in products, from graphics to video game mechanisms, which they believe should be delivered by the industry regardless of the financial or time cost involved (Sanati, 2015).

In contrast, more casual video game consumers generally are not characterized in the same way, though all players may be portrayed as engaging in frivolous pursuits. Analyses have portrayed gamer culture as unique and remarkable. Also, “serious gamers” may be depicted as

vocal and persistent in attempts to influence the video game industry when they are disappointed with video games products and services (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Jakobsson, 2011; Radd, 2007; Ruffino, 2015; Steinkuehler, 2006; Tassi, 2014).

Similar to the practices in other industries, video game publishers use Web 2.0 to develop and strengthen relationships with consumers. Not surprisingly, gamers typically are digital natives, who are very comfortable in the technological environment (Spiegelman & Glass, 2009). The potential for two-way communication has not necessarily led to the development of positive communication between gamers and publishers. For gamer, gamers have engaged in mass protests when they disagree with industry actions, sometimes managing to persuade the industry to change course (Tassi, 2014). Gamers' challenges to the industry may even attract the attention of mainstream media, and thus reinforce negative portrayals of gamer culture.

These portrayals, or frames, of gamers and gamer culture warrant consideration when examining engagement practices between the gaming industry and game consumers. Frames are defined as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). Hence, frames are constructed by academics and journalists to shape sensemaking and promote particular aspects of issues or groups (Entman, 1993). Because frames are subjective constructions rather than "objective reality," frames likely represent the interests of those offering the frames and are interpreted actively by those exposed to the frames. Rather than offering a purely objective description, frames may be constructed strategically to present particular, over-simplified perspectives about groups and issues. Though frames may reflect biases or simply the desire to "tell a compelling story," the frames may influence people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors toward groups and issues, especially when people lack direct

experience with the foci of the frames. Though images created through the framing may be accepted and used to filter subsequent information provided through exposure to additional frames, it is important to note this sensemaking is more *cocreative* than unidirectional. In other words, frames provided by outside groups such as politicians and activists may frame groups in particular ways to suit an agenda, filtering out the aspects of the group which prove their position, while ignoring others. Depending on the influence of these groups with other groups, the strategically crafted frames help to facilitate the “appropriate” sensemaking process.

Though the video game industry and consumers may draw up these frames to explain experiences, their understanding of the industry, games, gamers, and gamer culture should be more highly developed due to direct, personal experiences. The video game industry must continue to try to understand the expectation of consumers, including expectation gaps between what consumers desire and what games publishers provide. Stereotypes promoted through frames could prove unproductive. Moreover, there are numerous stakeholder groups associated with gaming culture. These include various types of game consumers and potential consumers. Reliance on overly simplistic media frames would hinder the maintenance and expansion of its current customer base, including both dedicated gamers and potential new consumers. To maximize exchange potential, organizations can try to cultivate relationships with consumers through two-way communication.

Just as media framing may shape industry perceptions, framing may shape consumer perceptions of the industry as well as other consumers. If the industry is portrayed as insensitive to consumer concerns, consumers may be reluctant to express their concerns to publishers. They could come to view their relationships with publishers as adversarial rather than mutually beneficial. Consumers naturally vary in their interest in products and services as well as their

interest in the organizations that supply these. Perceptions of industry responsiveness to their concerns might contribute to constructive, positive relationships with organizations and their products. Also, gamers' consumer images, or frames, that may affect their self-perceptions as gamers as well as perceptions of other gamers, including different "gamer types," which may range from casual, mobile device players who play simple games only when bored, to gamers who daily try to get an hour of play time a day, to gamers who sequester themselves for hours at a time for massively multiplayer online games (MMO), to gamers who earn income through playing. By comparing a gamer's playing habits to portrayals of other gamers, consumers may develop a sense of gamer "identity."

Interest in communication and relationships between organizations and consumers as well as between consumers has burgeoned with the development of digital communication opportunities. However, technological affordances alone cannot cultivate relationships. Brand-based factors, consumer-based factors, and situational and contextual factors drive consumer engagement with a brand or organization (Weitzl & Einwiller, 2018). The internet provides opportunities for both organizations and consumers to initiate potentially interactive relationships. The term *engagement* is used to describe communication-based efforts to develop these relationships.

This dissertation examines consumer perceptions of the engagement practices of the video game industry, consumer perceptions of their own engagement with the industry, and consumer perceptions of their engagement with other consumers. This work identifies how video game consumers initiate and respond to organizational engagement practices as well as the tensions that may arise from the expectation gaps. Additionally, this research also examines how

consumers engage with other consumers to appraise publisher engagement practices and expectation gaps.

The analysis in the dissertation goes beyond the current academic interpretations and operationalizations of stakeholder engagement terms to understand how consumers perceive and implement engagement practices. Industries may develop approaches on how to engage with their consumers, and through audience and marketing analysis, try to serve their consumers in ways that satisfy expectations while also finding ways to reach new consumers. However, it is possible that industry perceptions of effective and ethical engagement practices may not correspond to consumer perceptions. Also, because consumers are not homogeneous, their perceptions may be mutually exclusive, and thus produce expectation gaps between industry practices and consumer perceptions of engagement. As industries continue to seek ways to engage with their consumers more directly, engagement presents opportunities that may enhance consumer relationships. Alternatively, engagement also may create risks that could damage the reputation and bottom line of companies.

Within the context of strategic communication by the organization, engagement provides an opportunity to develop an orientation and practice that incorporates resources, measures, understandings, and values, as processes and outcomes of the engagement process. Strategic communication is defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). Though the term strategic communication has often been tied to organizational practices, individual communication can also be considered strategic communication if it seeks to accomplish a goal.

By looking at consumer engagement within the context of the AAA video game industry and consumers, readers can glimpse at how these engagement practices are implemented by a

consumer group that is often described as unique, irrational, or aberrant compared with other consumer groups when pressuring the video game industry (Balland, De Vaan, & Boschma, 2012; De Vaan, Boschma, & Frenken, 2012; Hotho & Champion, 2011; Tschang, 2007). Though often media attention is directed to active, visible consumer protests by committed gamers, it is important to recognize that most video game consumers would not identify with this vocal minority. The following section describes engagement as a strategic function that can be applied to relationships with consumers.

Literature Review

Engagement Theory

Engagement is conceptualized as a socially responsive approach to organizational communication, in which the outcomes of an organization align with the wants and needs of society (Men & Tsai, 2013). An organization is defined as an entity comprised of different individuals who share a collective goal linked to an external environment (Das, 2016). For this dissertation, the organizations of interests are the AAA video game companies. AAA (pronounced Triple A) video games are computer and console video games with significantly high development budgets and with significant investments into advertisement and promotion. Though video game publishers are very secretive regarding the actual budget of an individual game, the researcher goes with the assessment presented by Schreier (2017) in that these games cost USD 144,000,000+ to make.

Engagement, in general, refers to strategic communicative processes used by organizations to connect with those relevant to their goals. Organizations may pursue various forms of engagements with stakeholder, and there are numerous stakeholders who can affect or be affected by the organizations. The purpose of the engagement is to cultivate a positive

relationship between the organization and the stakeholders (Dawkins, 2014). Organizations may use engagement to encourage the development of social capital among their stakeholders through authentic discussion and dialogue. In an organizational setting, stakeholder engagement is a tool to manage relational outcomes (Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017). Ideally, meaningful, high-quality relationships arise from interdependence between organizations and stakeholders. Hon and Grunig (1999) claim that a relationship begins when the consequences created by an organization affect the public and vice versa. Accordingly, generating authentic, appropriate, and timely responses to stakeholder expectations should be a priority for organizations when they understand that stakeholders prefer to allocate resources to companies they respect, companies with whom they share values, and companies that demonstrate care for their stakeholders. Stakeholders also want organizations to be transparent with information, which provides consumers with knowledge about the organization, its products, and its services. Organizations that meet these relational expectations may facilitate the development of stronger positive feelings and behavioral intentions toward itself.

For organizations, engagement can produce value (economic benefits, profit) over the short and long terms through the development of committed social (consumer) relationships. Organizations create value for stakeholders when they generate benefits or meet needs, such as the need for a useful, desired product or service, in ways that stakeholders value. For example, stakeholders may want an easy-to-use product, one that functions as promised, and the organization can supply it. Thus, value creation by an organization can be defined through stakeholder purchase decisions, which signal that the organization is meeting needs and fulfilling expectations. Stakeholders may reward companies that create value not only by purchasing their products but also by developing positive affective orientations toward these organizations, as

manifested through consumer loyalty, positive posts on social media, and the perception that such organizations are socially responsible and caring corporate citizens. Organizations rightfully interpret these as supportive stakeholder behaviors. However, signals about value creation are mixed. Typically, multiple stakeholders have multiple interests and definitions of value and expectations. Various stakeholder groups may value different behaviors, depending on their interests. Additionally, stakeholder expectations and interests are not static and may change and evolve across time, thus requiring organizations to monitor stakeholder interests and value creation continuously.

Engagement is an essential concept in public relations as organizations seek to cultivate positive relationships with stakeholders for many strategic, instrumental purposes. Marketing research also notes the value of engagement in developing consumer relationships (Sashi, 2012). Stakeholders value two-way relationships when these relationships create value for them. Thus, mutually beneficial relationships are both a process and an outcome (J. E. Grunig, 2006). Although engagement theory and research appeared within the public relations literature over 20 years ago, it has garnered increased attention because of how the Internet has expanded opportunities for relationship development (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Most recently, engagement has been heralded as a new paradigm for 21st-century social media communication and that it contributes to the zeitgeist of public relations (Men & Muralidharan, 2016).

Despite the scholarly and professional interest in engagement, research on engagement has suffered from the use of inconsistent conceptual definitions both between and within disciplines (K. A. Johnston, 2018). Additionally, the lack of consensus on conceptual definitions naturally translates into problems with engagement measurement operationalizations as well as engagement practices. Conceptualizations of engagement may vary between disciplines (K. A.

Johnston, 2018). For example, in organizational psychology research, contemporary measures of engagement often resemble existing measures on individual-level commitment and satisfaction. This approach can be problematic because factors, such as satisfaction or commitment, are often applied to an individual's engagement in work instead of investment or participation in relational engagement processes and outcomes, as envisioned by communication-oriented approaches to engagement (e.g., J.E. Grunig, 2006). From a public relations perspective, engagement typically is envisioned to occur *between* stakeholders and organizations; therefore, it is inconsistent with individually-focused psychological approaches to engagement with work itself. Finally, in the field of education, engagement as a term is used to “depict students' willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending class, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class” (Chapman, 2003).

The paucity of rigorous academic inquiry into the nature and practice of engagement has not deterred organizations from claiming to embrace some forms of engagement. In business contexts, engagement has become a favorite buzzword linked to socially responsible business practices and the intention to spur motivational and organizational change (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). Organizations may be self-congratulatory when claiming to practice engagement, although their understanding of its potential practices and drawbacks may be limited. For example, some organizations may equate one-way communication processes, such as providing transparent information, as engagement. Increasingly, the public has used two-way communication, in the form of social media, to initiate engagement, and respond to organizational engagement, and forcing companies to also rely on social media as a critical tool for public engagement (Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2017). The success of organizational engagement in this new public and media environment may be primarily

dependent on an organization's ability to effectively (and positively) engage stakeholders and co-create meaning in ways that are valued by stakeholders.

In general, scholars and professionals in public relations view engagement as the ultimate indicator of an excellent organization–public relationship (OPR) (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). Scholars have attempted to connect online interactive engagement to positive outcomes, such as increased donations to non-profits, as well as positive relationship-building. Kent and Taylor (2002) view engagement as a dimension of dialogue, a mutually oriented state of mind whose participants are “willing to give their whole selves” (p. 26) to communication encounters among dialogic partners. However, in practice, the extent of mutuality is debatable.

Thus, engagement ideally extends beyond the mechanics of simple two-way communication. It requires an understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to dialogue with and among stakeholders and organizations as community building discourse and co-management (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Engagement should be a critical aspect of organizational behavior that operates in an environment that is sensitive to power relations and requires organizations to be transparent about the value of their interactions (Edelman, 2008). However, engagement is a complicated process; organizations strive to balance diverse stakeholder perspectives, some of which might be mutually exclusive, without seeming to be duplicitous. Hence, issues of trust, power, ethics, and moral perspective should underpin discussions of engagement within organizations if they seek to increase confidence and accountability in their relationships with stakeholders.

The cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of engagement have been examined in previous research (K. A. Johnston, 2018). Cognitive engagement requires investment from the

organization in developing knowledge and includes consumer interest in a topic and a willingness to exert energy toward understanding complex ideas (K. A. Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Tsai & Men, 2013), whether they are in the form of consumer research or through informal conversations between like-minded consumers in person or online (e.g., Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Affective engagement refers to positive and negative emotional reactions from consumers to the engagement processes, establishing a sense of belonging, as well as emotional responses to organizations (Men & Tsai, 2014). Positive or negative engagement leads to conditions for motivation, interest, or concern. Finally, behavioral engagement includes the elements of participation, collaboration, action, and involvement (intended and unintended). Often, the term behavioral engagement is used to refer to the communicative interactions of engagement (Dhanesh, 2017).

Additionally, the concept of orientation refers to the collectively held philosophy of beliefs and behaviors related to the meaning and values of stakeholder views and perspectives (K. A. Johnston & Taylor, 2018). An engagement orientation is culturally-bound and endorsed within the social practices of a group and as an organizational philosophy (M. Taylor & Kent, 2014). A pre-existing attitude determines the willingness to act. Intention reflects intrinsic motivations or a stakeholder's readiness to perform a behavior (Noland & Phillips, 2010). Finally, an experience is an interaction or connection that is an outcome of the engagement. It not only aligns with the behavioral dimension of individual engagement but also recognizes the social level of influence.

Thus far, the discussion of engagement suggests that engagement is not only socially responsible and desirable but also challenging to operationalize, implement, and assess. However, is all engagement desired for similar reasons? What are people's expectations for

engagement with an organization? What are the organization's expectations? These questions require us to revisit the notion of value creation.

Bishop and Davis (2002) argue that participation involves an expectation by community members to have a voice and influence when it comes to organizational outcomes. Smith and Taylor's (2017) investigation of people's motives for communicating through social media and perceptions of their ability to influence others revealed that the respondents primarily used social media to satisfy their information and social interaction needs, especially with particular individuals and groups. Some people reported that they believed they could influence others by providing high-quality information and creating awareness; they described their sphere of influence as limited to their social networks or participation in groups. Interestingly, most respondents reported that they rarely communicated with organizations on social media, and when they did, they did not feel that they could influence these organizations. However, they did consume the organizations' promotional content and sought to influence their networks by sharing opinions about organizations' products, services, and the issues related to these organizations. These respondents felt that their influence emerged through information sharing and, thus, their influence on organizations was primarily indirect. By contrast, those who felt they could exercise a more direct influence on organizations attributed their ability to influence to the nature of their relationships with these organizations (e.g., social and professional roles, such as those of an employee, alumnus, loyal customer, or news reporter).

The discussion by Smith and Taylor (2017) presents several essential points to consider in this project. They suggest that information sharing between social media users, such as video gamers sharing information and opinions with other gamers via social media, can be seen as a means to an end, and both the means and ends involve engagement processes. Creating and

revealing a consensus among several gamers may contribute to the perception that there is power in numbers (vs. one gamer who cannot influence an organization on his/her own) and thus a possibility of influencing the organization. This peer-to-peer engagement creates social capital. Smith and Taylor also note that the respondents who “sought influence over an organization often did so from the context of self-interested entitlement based on their position or attachment to the organization” (p. 159), which Kang (2014) terms as “sense of authorization to act.” As explained by Smith and Taylor (2017), this sense of entitlement may stem from the organization’s responsibility to its most important stakeholders.

It is important to note that Smith and Taylor’s research offered only a generalized view of motivations for individual engagement using social media, with the participants focusing primarily on *social engagement* within their networks rather than influence-related engagement. For this dissertation, the researcher will seek to understand how video game consumers may attempt to engage organizations as well as other consumers in order to potentially influence these organizations’ actions, as well as how consumers perceive organizations’ engagement practices. In this way the researcher seeks to understand consumer perceptions of the processes, practices, and outcomes of engagement.

This part of the literature review primarily focuses on engagement theory and how engagement has been studied from an organizational perspective. The video game industry is not unique in that it chooses to engage; however, previous research indicates that its consumers are actively reciprocating that engagement and communicating their expectations to the industry (Behrenshausen, 2013; D. Williams, 2003). The quantity of communication from video game consumers provides an access point for data collection that can provide insight into consumer motivations for trying to influence an organization. However, although the researcher

hypothesizes consumers of video games may be interested in engaging and being engaged, their views of engagement may still differ from previous academic and even working definitions.

While understanding how consumers may view ideal organizational engagement as necessary, determining how they perceive engagement, as it exists now, is equally important. For example, while some consumers may have their expectations met by organizations, others may feel that they are being ignored or engaged inappropriately. From an organizational perspective, a truly engaged organization attempts to understand and meet the needs of its consumers. However, these needs are filtered through a lens of the organization's needs, which primarily come first. Therefore, for this dissertation, primarily focusing on the expectations of consumers is crucial to understanding and privileging their experiences, so that organizations may learn from their consumers.

Consumer Engagement

As society has become increasingly globalized and connected through online networks, consumers can interact much easier with companies and other consumers (Kaul et al., 2015; Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015). The practice is attributed partly to the rise of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, as well as the ease of access to online blogging platforms, such as Wordpress, Blogger, and Medium (M. Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016). As a result, companies are always pursuing new strategies to steer both transactional and non-transactional customer behaviors (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). In marketing, non-transactional behaviors are influencing behaviors which may translate into future purchases (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010), including word-of-mouth advertising and customer rating systems. Companies have understood the potential negative consequences of non-transactional behavior, such as negative word-of-mouth (WOM), which, if not appropriately

managed, could launch a company into a crisis. Therefore, the idea of consumer engagement is to capture non-transactional customer behaviors and use them to a company's advantage (Riegner, 2007).

Van Doorn et al. (2010) state that “customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions and may be defined explicitly as a customer's behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 254). Previous research on consumer management has focused on the transactional sides of relationships (e.g., financial investments). Multiple researchers have investigated the antecedents of customer behavior and developed methods to predict this behavior (Verhoef et al., 2010). Customer lifetime value (CLV) and customer equity have been identified as critical overarching customer metrics (Gupta, Lehmann, & Stuart, 2004; Gupta & Zeithaml, 2006; Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004; Venkatesan & Kumar, 2004; Verhoef, Van Doorn, & Dorotic, 2007). Despite the focus on the transactional side of the relationship, WOM as a form of non-transactional behavior has gained sufficient attention in the existing literature (Verhoef, Franses, & Hoekstra, 2002; Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens, 2008).

Although for companies, the transactional side of the consumer/brand relationship, particularly through branding, is crucial because it is a measurement of cash flow. An organization's use of branding or transmedia branding is “a communication process in which information about a brand is packaged into an integrated narrative, which is dispersed in unique contributions across multiple media channels for the purpose of creating an interactive and engaging brand experience” (Tenderich & Williams, 2014, p. 16). According to Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2013), through media branding interaction organizations can enhance relationships with brand communities by building brand trust and loyalty. Engaging experiences

are not only regulated to the consumer/company relationship. Laroche, Habibi, and Richard further stipulates that media branding interaction has a significant positive effect on the consumer/product relationship, the consumer/brand relationship, and the consumer/consumer relationship.

However, ignoring non-transactional behaviors may create lost opportunities, which can affect that cash flow if not correctly managed. In ignoring non-transactional behaviors of branding like word-of-mouth or identity with a brand, customers may be valued incorrectly when customer engagement is not considered (Kumar, Aksoy, et al., 2010). Segmenting and valuing customers in the wrong way may potentially create a misallocation of resources across customers (Rust et al., 2004). Kumar et al. (2010) strongly emphasize that ignoring customer engagement may lead to an undervaluation or overvaluation of customers. They introduce customer engagement value (CEV) as an overarching new customer value metric that includes both value from transactions (CLV) and value from non-transactional behavior. Importantly, Kumar et al. (2010) distinguish three non-transactional values: customer referral value (CRV), customer influence value (CIV), and customer knowledge value (CKV). However, there is some disagreement among scholars on the conceptualization of CEV. Kumar et al.'s (2010) conceptualization of CEV disagrees with that of Van Doorn et al. (2010) that customer engagement only involves behavior that goes beyond transactions. Van Doorn et al. (2010) argue that CLV should remain the overarching customer value metric to which the value results from customer engagement (i.e., CRV, CIV, and CKV) is added.

Researchers have also examined how customer satisfaction changes and evolves (Bolton & Lemon, 1999; Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). Others have examined how marketing activities affect customer responses over time (Bolton & Drew, 1991), how customer satisfaction changes

over time affect the share of wallet (Cooil, Keiningham, Aksoy, & Hsu, 2007), and how individuals adjust their expectations over time (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002). The key to understanding the dynamics of the nature of customer engagement is through an empirical measurement known as customer engagement behavior (CEB). CEB has five dimensions: valence, the form of modality, the scope, the nature of its impact, and customer goals (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

From an organization's perspective, customer valence is the positive and negative perceptions that a customer has. Positive engagement refers to the actions that have both short- and long-term positive consequences for the company, both financially and non-financially. These actions include online reviews, WOM activity, or mass media engagement. However, positive customer engagement can turn into negative engagement because while a loyal customer may recommend a brand or product, the potential consumer may disagree upon trying the product, creating a poor fit between that potential customer and the brand.

Form and modality are the different ways by which consumers express engagement. At the most basic and measurable level, engagement is expressed through resources, specifically time and money spent (Verhoef et al., 2007). However, Bolton and Saxena-Iyer (2009) argue for three other behaviors that can be expressed by consumers: in-role behaviors, extra-role behaviors, and elective behaviors. In-role behaviors occur within the parameters defined by an organization. For example, if a consumer chooses to request a refund for a product that he/she does not like, the company will direct him/her to the necessary channels and resources to potentially receive a refund. Failure to follow the procedures consequently and definitively leads to no refund. Extra-role behaviors are optional activities that customers may choose to engage in, such as offering suggestions on how to care for a product or informing the company about a

malfunction they are experiencing with a product. Finally, elective behaviors occur when consumers engage with the purpose of achieving consumption goals. These behaviors include providing general feedback about a product in hopes that the company will respond or seeking help from the company on how to use a product (e.g., IT support). In addition to these three behaviors, when measuring customer engagement, companies must also understand the types of firm- or brand-level outcomes that customers can achieve. These different outcomes can vary in magnitude and nature of the impact on both customers and firms. These behaviors include an apology, changes in the firm's policies, improvements in the customer knowledge base (whether provided by the company or other customers), changes in the customer–employee interface, and changes in the company's regulatory environment.

Companies assess the temporal and geographic scope of CEB through systematic and ongoing customer actions (Verhoef et al., 2007). Companies may develop specific processes to monitor and address customer engagement. In particular, the geographic scope of CEB may be determined by the previous modality and form dimensions used by consumers.

The impact of CEBs on companies is conceptualized in four ways. First, the immediacy of impacts refers to how quickly CEB affects stakeholders, in particular, an intended target audience. Second, the intensity of impact is the level of change that occurs within the targeted audience, whereas, third, the breadth of impact reflects the number of people (both targeted and non-targeted audiences) affected. Fourth, the longevity of impact, or how long the impact lasts, is dependent on several factors, including the ability to preserve the activity in some form.

Finally, a company must understand and consider a customer's purpose or goal of engagement. The factors that influence consumer behaviors toward the company may be distinct from those that are directed toward the overall product market. If a customer's goals align with a

company's goals, then CEB should have a positive impact on the firm; however, if the goals are misaligned, negative consequences will result (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Antecedents of Consumer Engagement Behavior. To better understand CEB, this dissertation relies on the conceptual model of CEB illustrated by Van Doorn et al. (2010). The conceptual model consists of two parts, antecedents and consequences, which affect CEB. There are three types of antecedent factors that affect engagement: customer based, firm based, and context based.

First, customer-based antecedents are defined by the following six factors: satisfaction, trust/commitment, identity, consumption goals, resources, and perceived costs and benefits. Satisfaction, trust/commitment, and identity are related to attachment to the brand. The more a consumer is satisfied, trusts, or identifies with a brand, the higher the levels of engagement. However, the reverse can also be true: dissatisfaction, distrust, and lack of identification also may lead to high levels of engagement.

Consumption goals play a role in higher levels of engagement, for example, maximizing consumption benefits or relational benefits because it can influence how the brand is used and, more importantly, how consumers engage with the brand. It is important to note that sometimes, the goals of a consumer may be unrelated to the actual brand or product; instead, the goals may be related to the consumer base or market (e.g., engaging in helping behaviors with other consumers). Although unrelated to the brand, these behaviors are considered CEB because they provide channels of engagement with other consumers and even potential consumers.

Individual customer traits and predispositions may influence cognitive processes and decision making in predictable ways, which can affect the resulting CEB. For example, those who are more group-focused are more likely to motivate others to purchase or engage with a

brand. Likewise, if they see something negative about the brand, they are more likely to speak up and engage in negative WOM. The affective states of consumers, such as disgust or anger toward a brand, can lead to CEBs. Some of these behaviors are the result of extreme experiences, which results in previously satisfied customers turning into a company's worst enemies (Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010). By contrast, an extremely positive experience may motivate a consumer to engage in positive WOM and become an advocate for the company. Regardless of whether the extreme experience is positive or negative, the response of the customer is stronger than before, especially in cases of double deviation, defined as a second or successive favorable or adverse event (R. Johnston & Fern, 1999).

Finally, resources and perceived costs and benefits affect consumers' level of CEBs from a consumer's amount of time, effort, and money given to a brand. While there may be extreme cases of people over-investing their resources, the brand is not concerned if this happens to a consumer (Verhoef et al., 2007).

The next set of antecedents is firm-based antecedents, which are also categorized into five factors: brand characteristics, firm reputation, firm size/diversification, firm information usage and processes, and industry. The perceived and actual characteristics of a brand can strongly influence CEBs. Brands with strong reputations and equity correlate with higher levels of positive CEB (De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Keller, 1998), but the opposite is also true. A negative brand reputation and equity are correlated with negative CEBs (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Thus, both positive and negative CEBs can motivate people to engage, and as illustrated before with customer-based contexts, a consumer can switch between positive and negative CEBs.

Firms and companies themselves can also influence CEB by providing platforms that support specific consumer actions, such as customer service phone numbers or social media

accounts (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremier, 2004). Companies are also providing platforms for customer-to-customer engagement, including official social media groups or messages boards, or facilitating customer get-togethers (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Finally, firms engage consumers by developing resources for consumer learning, like YouTube video tutorials. These platforms can create consumer information environments, which can also affect CEBs (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009). Firms that are adept at managing information environments can affect CEBs; for example, the video game industry conference, E3, is an event in which video game companies spend millions of dollars to display their products to the audience in attendance; these presentations are recorded to showcase to a broader media audience outside of the conference.

Firms also affect CEBs by promising rewards and other incentives to consumers. These incentives can be in the form of referrals, social or expertise recognition within a desired in-group (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Winterich, Mittal, & Ross Jr, 2009), or free items, which vary in quality. Firm size and reputation, as well as the willingness of organizations to invest based on their consumer base, play a role in determining how they position themselves regarding rewards and incentives.

Finally, context-based antecedents affect CEB through competitive factors related to political or legal, economic or environmental, social, and technological aspects. Van Doorn et al. (2010) has created the humorous acronym P.E.S.T. to help readers remember these aspects.

The political/legal environment context, including media regulation, can encourage or discourage information flow, affecting consumer engagement. Likewise, companies may use natural or environmental events as a way to enhance their corporate social responsibility image;

for example, they may donate funds to help victims of disasters and encourage consumers to buy products that help promote relief efforts.

Finally, the technological and social aspects play a role in CEBs. As illustrated before, the Internet plays a significant role in getting consumers to engage not only with a brand but with other consumers. While firms do create their events or platforms to help facilitate engagement, many consumers will create their own platforms of communication to express their positive or negative experiences. If a brand is receiving heavy criticism from a faction of consumers (or ex-consumers), another faction may be motivated to start a counter-platform in order to fight against the negative press.

In summary, customer-, firm-, and context-based antecedents can directly affect CEBs, both facilitating and inhibiting engagement. While many of these factors can directly affect CEBs, understanding that these factors can interact with one another to create a stronger impact is also important. However, additional theoretical and empirical work is necessary to explore this idea further (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Consequences of Consumer Engagement Behavior. Consumer engagement has consequences for many different stakeholders, including customers, companies, and constituents (Verhoef et al., 2007). At the most basic level, the consequence for customers is cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral. However, resources and identity can also play a role in how the consequences of CEB play out. If CEB efforts are successful, customers will engage more frequently and more intensively in CEB actions. If, on the other hand, customers are unsuccessful, in the long run, they may switch to different engagement strategies. Successful customers may also expand on their CEBs by actively contributing content after initially joining a community.

Other subtle effects can influence customer equity (Borle, Dholakia, Singh, & Westbrook, 2007). In situations in which incentives, such as loyalty or reward programs, can prompt CEBs, there may be direct positive financial consequences for customers. By participating, customers not only help a firm but also gain financially. Customers likewise derive emotional benefits by feeling that they have helped benefit a brand they like. Finally, the consumption of a particular product or brand helps customers shape and reinforce their social identity (e.g., Harley Davidson owners and the reinforcement of the biker identity through fan clubs).

Besides customers, CEBs also have consequences for a company or firm. First, there are financial consequences for the firm. Many CEBs, such as referral behaviors, WOM behaviors, and actions aimed at generating and disseminating information (e.g., blogging), should affect the purchase behavior of focal customers and other customers, consequently influencing customer equity (Riegner, 2007).

Second, there are reputational consequences for the firm. Engaged customers contribute to the long-term reputation and recognition of the brand, as evidenced by their participation in brand communities and support of events related to the brand (Verhoef et al., 2007). Customers create and disseminate information related to the firm and brand, which can be used by others to help further the reputation of the company over the years (Laroche et al., 2013). Highly engaged customers can be a crucial source of knowledge for a brand or company, helping with ideas for the design and development of new products, making suggestions to modify existing brands, and engaging in a trial of beta products.

Finally, while customer and company consequences are the focus in evaluating CEBs, understanding the consequences on other constituents is prudent (Van Doorn et al., 2010). In today's digital economy, the actions of the focal firm and its customers may be highly

transparent and visible to the customers of other firms (Laroche et al., 2013). In particular, access to information about competitors—through CEBs, such as blogs or publicly posted complaints and suggestions—can further stimulate and enhance competition (Sashi, 2012). In other instances, the customers of different organizations can unite in ways that benefit the broader consumer community.

Because they can maintain and nurture relationships with other customers, brands, firms, and regulators independent of the focal firm, customers can exert a powerful influence on the focal firm and its brand (Laroche et al., 2013). Therefore, firms should proactively manage CEBs. Managing CEBs can be done by identifying engagement behaviors and customers, evaluating engagement manifestations, and acting on customers' engagement behavior. Companies must understand that consumers can help firms value their customer base financially and identify engagement behaviors and customers (Van Doorn et al., 2010). In evaluating engagement manifestations, companies should consider the consequences for both short- and long-term objectives. Translating them into financial metrics can also improve decision making about the customer base, especially the “engaged” customer base. Over time, firms may integrate CEB metrics with other metrics of marketing and organizational performance to enhance the understanding of particular CEBs related to their companies.

In summary, CEB is a useful framework for customer segmentation because it observes multiple types of engagement behaviors. Previous literature on customer segmentation has always considered customer choice as the primary variable for analysis, but CEB includes different varieties of engagement behaviors. Van Doorn et al. (2010) note that CEB is an apt model to use for the research of consumers and online services, including games, movies, and online reviews, because it considers “the multitude of moderators to develop comprehensive

segmentation strategies with the goal of maximizing profitability (p. 264). Specifically, consumers who purchase little or who are not, yet consumers can be effectively targeted through a company's nurturing of behaviors. Regarding AAA video game publishers, this dissertation seeks to analyze the consumer engagement value of game consumers by examining their behaviors and how they engage with a product. Specifically, the segmentation of video game consumers will be pertinent to the analysis in understanding how engagement is performed

Today, the video game industry is characterized by increased growth and a high degree of innovation and dynamism. The enormous growth of the video game market is due in part to the broadening of relevant consumer groups through heterogeneity of video game genres, playing platforms, and interactive networks. However, while academic research on video games has grown, marketing research on the video game industry, including consumer engagement, is scant, compared to other entertainment industries like movies, television, or music (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Therefore, studying the consumer engagement and behaviors of video game consumers is important because it helps to identify new avenues for consumer engagement for video game publishers.

To understand the potential for business-to-consumer (B2C) and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement, a brief overview of the game studies literature is warranted. The game studies research provides the context for how the video game industry and culture operate and influence one other. The next sections of the literature review provide a brief overview of the current academic literature in the field of game studies, as well as research on industry dynamics and game culture.

Game Studies

Determining the cultural worth of video games, and the video game industry, has always been a subject of debate among academics, politicians, and the public (Shaw, 2010). However, academics have felt that video games, the video game culture, and the video game industry are worthy of serious critical analysis (Southern, 2002).

Game studies are the study of games and the players and cultures surrounding them. In the early to mid-20th century, game studies were primarily examined from an anthropology perspective, exploring the cultural importance of play and games in ancient societies. The research of Huizinga (1938) and Callois and Barash (1961) helped provide a sound basis on which modern game studies was built. In the mid-1980s, as interest in video games rose, so did the interest in game studies. Frasca (1999) has created a new definition for the study of games, *ludology*, taken from the Latin word for “game.” In 2001, the first academic journal for game studies, titled *Game Studies*, was released, and two years later, the Digital Games Research Association was established, legitimizing the field of game studies as a serious academic subject.

As game studies has emerged as an intellectual, academic field, competing paradigms have taken shape, and specific to this dissertation, these are the debates between the active audience and culture industries.

The active audience in cultural studies suggests that the audience members of a product are active participators, contributing and defining how the product is depicted within the broader cultural scene (Bolin, 2012). The active audience theory argues that audience members are not passively receiving information but are instead actively involved in how media messages are perceived (D. Chandler & Munday, 2011). The perceptual decoding of media messages can influence values, norms, and experiences for both the personal and social self. An emerging

area of research into active audiences is Hinck's (2019) framework of fan citizenship. Fan citizenship is the emotional and affective tie to fandom, in which fans cultivate a specialization of knowledge regarding their object of fandom; in the case of this dissertation, the object of fandom would be video games. The fan citizenship continues into participation in a community of fans, further reinforcing the importance and emotional tether of the product or object of fandom.

On the other side of the paradigm debate, culture industries is a critical theory arguing that culture acts as a factory of pre-manufactured goods that the audience blindly consumes, regardless of the resources available (Horkheimer, Adorno, & Noeri, 2002). For a product or object to be considered a part of the culture industry, it needs to be outside the realm of public funding, and the whole range of cultural goods and objects consumed should have nothing at all to do with the public funding system (O'Connor, 2000). The theory argues that the control of culture primarily rests on the organizations or groups that create the cultural product, and not the group which consumes it. For example, Consalvo (2006) argues that despite globalization of video game consumers, two countries still stand out in driving the video game industry since its inception: Japan and the United States. Their power is not derived from the number of consumers in each country, but the construction and selling of console devices where the games are played. Countries like South Korea and China, which have the highest amount of active video game consumers have contributed to the industry by consuming the products, but tend to have little input on video game industry practices (Shaw, 2010).

In the realm of video game culture, these competing paradigms create conflict between consumers and publishers. On the one hand, it is the job of the publisher to mass-produce video games and to continually make money, and publishers need to protect their intellectual property.

However, for the video game industry to survive, gamers need to do more than just purchase and consume games. A game's legitimacy and validity rely on how consumers engage with a product beyond playability, including discussing the game on forums, visiting conventions, and even creating modifications for the game in order to express creativity (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). These labor of love acts may lead gamers to believe that they act as active audience members, so when video game publishers implement systems and measures, such as anti-piracy circumvention and digital streaming, these are considered an attack on consumers (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). For this dissertation, the project does not subscribe to one paradigm over another, but rather it explores the tension between these paradigms when discussing why good video games go bad.

Another issue that has generated considerable debate in game studies, as well as within the video game community, is how to best identify gamer types and player ideologies (Consalvo, 2009b). There has always been significant pressure to attempt to quantify and categorize gamers, whether this is for research purposes, marketing segmentation, or for personal pride (Behrenshausen, 2013). The problem, however, is that the definitions for gamer types are inconsistent, and their measurements even less consistent.

Over the years, numerous game studies and media scholars have attempted to create and measure gamer typologies with varying results. Appendix A provides a small handful of the more popular game typology measures; however, these are not the only measures related to the topic. Most of these tests rely either on psychographic or behavioral segmentation (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014).

Psychographic segmentation groups people according to their attitudes, interests, values and lifestyles (Tseng, 2011; Whang & Chang, 2004; Yee, 2006; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee,

Ducheneaut, & Nelson, 2012; Zackariasson, Wåhlin, & Wilson, 2010), whereas behavioral segmentation finds patterns in consumers' behavior toward or with a product (Bartle, 1996; Drachen, Canossa, & Yannakakis, 2009; Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010; Ip & Jacobs, 2005; Kallio, Mäyrä, & Kaipainen, 2011; Lazzaro, 2004). Some typologies incorporate both psychographic and behavioral segmentation (Stewart, 2011), whereas many researchers within the industry may just rely on in-game demographics to determine customer segmentation (Dmitri Williams et al., 2006).

The Video Game Culture and the Industry

Today, the global video game industry includes video games on PCs and game consoles that can connect to TVs and have portable hardware. Today's consumer has access to multiple devices, whether mobile or tablets and more, to play video games (Hall, 2011). Research on gamer culture has proliferated as the video game industry has grown and as gaming develops increasing importance as a mainstay of contemporary culture (Bissell, 2011; Bogost, 2011; Donovan, 2010).

Since the commercial release of the first home consoles in the 1970s, video games have been a central player in the transformation of privatized entertainment consumption (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) grimly point out, video games are "A media that once seemed all fun is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital" (p. xi). However, this line of thinking assumes that the industry is in total control, whereas other schools differ. Consalvo's (2009a) concept of gaming capital is a rework of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital that explicitly focuses on video games. Cultural capital is the intellectual or educational skills that can provide an individual with a higher status in society (Bourdieu, 1986). As a form

of labor, cultural capital “is work on oneself (self-improvement), is an effort that presupposes a personal cost...an investment, above all time...with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail” (p. 244). Consalvo’s (2009a) re-working explores gaming capital as “the dynamism of gameplay as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry” (p. 4) through the application of intellectual skills to the video game medium. If one thinks of gaming capital as a form of currency that can be cashed in for benefits, “gaming capital is highly flexible, able to adapt to different types of gameplay, various games, and changing notions of what’s important to know about games” (p. 184).

The video game industry has tried to commodify gaming capital, with varying degrees of success. In the 1980s and 1990s, players could document their high scores from home without having to pay quarters each time they play. Nintendo realized the potential of competitive gaming and, similar to *Twin Galaxies*, began to collect photos of high scores, printing them in magazines, such as *Nintendo Power* and *Sega Visions*. Nintendo took its curation one step further, awarding certificates and patches for extraordinary achievements (Jakobsson, 2011). However, the video game industry had the primary control of information, which was disseminated to gamers through promotional materials and gaming trade journals (Donovan, 2010). In controlling information, the industry was able to target a customer segment directly and control the population it wanted to sell to. However, with gaming culture’s quick adoption of technology like the Internet, fans started to create their websites, forums, and communities in order to trade information and gaming capital, outside the control of the industry (I. O. Taylor, 2015).

On the one hand, the industry now had access to a broader customer demographic; on the other hand, developers also lacked the control they once had (Consalvo, 2009b). Perceiving they

had power over the industry, gamers actively attempted to resist any industry commodification and became the decision-makers of what counts as valuable gaming capital (Consalvo, 2006). Confidence in their expert judgments and evaluations built and reinforced the commitment to gamers' ideas.

Understanding game culture and, subsequently, the agency a person has when playing a video game is essential to understanding how the industry has developed (Shaw, 2010). Understanding previous well-publicized incidents of gamers exercising influence in areas of the video game industry may fuel their expectations and confidence about meaningful engagement with publishers. For example, the most recent (and arguably most notorious) event was 2014's #GamerGate movement, which proponents argued to be based on concerns about journalistic integrity on video game news sites, especially how video games were rated, whereas critics argued that the movement was a front for sexism and misogyny in the video game culture (Tassi, 2014). The event itself led to policy changes in journalistic ethics for video game news sites (Grant, 2014) while also promoting industry-wide discussions about gender disparity in the culture (Levy, 2014). Other noteworthy events include Microsoft 180 in 2013, when Microsoft was forced to revamp its latest-generation console because consumers were unsatisfied with the product (with a little help from Sony), as well as the Retake Mass Effect event in 2012 when gamers demanded that the company create a better ending to the game *Mass Effect 3* (2012) because they were dissatisfied with the conclusion of the story (Tassi, 2014). Additional attempts at influence video game industry practices with some success revolved around financial complaints, including set price points of AAA video games, which, since the 1990s, have been around USD 59.99, and microtransactions, a business model in which players can purchase

individual goods through micropayments, such as USD 0.99, although users can spend more money to obtain higher rewards (Cox, 2014).

The gamer culture itself has often demonstrated that at times game players are motivated to mobilize and connect with other gamers in order to discuss concerns they have about the industry, discussions that may lead consumers to try to influence how the industry operates and engages (Tassi, 2014). Academic accounts often try to present the gamer's side of the story, without looking at the "secondhand reports" that describe gamers (Shaw, 2010). Likewise, journalists and outside interest groups tend to "otherize" gamers as a distinct culture, separate from the constructed mainstream (Shaw, 2010). Therefore, when exploring how video game consumers engage with publishers and other consumers, the research must look at how engagement is perceived from different perspectives. Part two of Study II (Chapter III) provides an account of engagement from a journalist or outside perspective, whereas Study III (Chapter IV) provides a perspective from consumers.

Organization of the Dissertation

Aside from the introductory and discussion chapters, this dissertation is divided into three separate studies designed to contribute to our understanding of how video game consumers engage with AAA video game publishers, as well as other video game consumers.

Focus and Rationale for Study One

As consumers, gamers are perceived as more engaged compared with other groups; however, their behaviors sometimes are portrayed as overzealous and irrational by outside groups (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). In the last decade, gamers have participated in some consumer movements meant to influence business practices, such as Retake Mass Effect and #GamerGate. These movements have been met not only with varying success but also with

significant criticism. As seen with previous literature, the definitions of engagement are inconsistent, and the identities between consumers are varied, posing questions of how perceptions of engagement may apply to different groups of video game consumers.

Research Questions and Hypotheses. Study One (Chapter II) is a quantitative analysis examining the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of video game consumers. Study participants are asked to report how they think of themselves in terms of three common gamer types (casual, average, and hardcore). Specifically, the study examines how different types of gamers (casual, average, and hardcore) perceive ideal engagement with companies, their perceptions of engagement practices of the AAA publishers, and the consumer behaviors that video game consumers may implement. The research questions and hypotheses are posed to explore how this sample of video game consumers self-identify as gamers, and how these identifications are associated with perceptions of their own engagement experiences with publishers and other consumers.

The first set of hypotheses examines activities related to video games and whether these activities differ across the three types of gamers.

H1a: A monotonic relationship exists between playing video games non-professionally and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1b: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends in person about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1c: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends online about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1d: A monotonic relationship exists between participating in official video game forums and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1e: A monotonic relationship exists between discussing video games on social media and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1f: A monotonic relationship exists between watching Let's Plays and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1g: A monotonic relationship exists between watching professional video game competitions and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

The second set of hypotheses explores the behaviors of video gamers, particularly concerning monetary resources and whether video game publishers meet gamers' wants and needs.

H2: A monotonic relationship exists between the amount of disposable income spent on video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H3: A monotonic relationship exists between the likelihood of pre-ordering video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H4: A monotonic relationship exists between met wants and needs from video game publishers and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

The next set of questions explores video game consumer perceptions of the importance of specific industry engagement practices, including the extent to which publisher engagement practices meet their expectations for ideal engagement practices. Four components of AAA publisher engagement were examined: authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness. These components were selected based on their prominence in previous literature on engagement (Boyd, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men & Tsai, 2014).

RQ1: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of the importance of communication characteristics commonly associated with engagement practices (e.g., authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) with AAA video game publishers?

RQ2: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of specific engagement practices of AAA video game publishers?

The next research question explores self-reports of behaviors associated with consumer engagement/ As previously discussed, Kumar and Pansari (2016) offer a framework for examining customer engagement in four areas, represented by using four different subscales: consumer lifetime value (CLV), consumer referral value (CRV), consumer influence value (CIV), and consumer knowledge value (CKV).

RQ3: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in enacting consumer engagement behaviors?

The last set of hypotheses proposes that a monotonic relationship exists among gamer types for the frequency of communication a consumer has with video game publishers and fellow consumers.

H5: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with publishers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher.

H6: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with other consumers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher.

Study One also explores participants' general attitudes toward AAA publisher behaviors. According to Keng, Richmond, and Han (1995), it is important to understand how consumers perceive company behaviors because this information could be used as an opportunity to enhance marketing effectiveness; therefore their measure assesses consumer beliefs about the organization's practices as well as actual and/or anticipated interactions with the company.

RQ4: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in attitudes toward AAA video game publishers?

Finally, the last set of research questions explores retaliation by consumers against publishers. Using a retaliation measure by Grégoire and Fisher (2008), the study explores two dimensions of retaliation: demands for reparation and retaliatory behaviors.

RQ5a: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in problem-solving complaining behaviors enacted against a AAA video game publisher?

RQ5b: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in vindictive complaining/retaliatory behaviors enacted against a AAA video game publisher?

RQ5c: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in complaining behaviors enacted with other video game consumers?

In addition to Grégoire and Fisher's measure (2008), a series of items was developed by the researcher to assess a range of actions that consumers might take against a video game publisher over a negative engagement experience.

RQ6: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in enacting retaliatory behaviors against a AAA video game publisher?

Method. Study One uses data collected via a cross-sectional survey to examine respondents' engagement practices with game publishers and other consumers. The survey participants were recruited through multiple venues and prescreened regarding age and purchasing behavior. A copy of the full survey is shown in Appendix B.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) was used as the theoretical foundation for the approach used to identify types of gamers. This theory helps explain how people develop perceptions of themselves as well as others and how these perceptions influence their behaviors and cognitions. The hypotheses and research questions required comparisons among gamer types, making it necessary to employ a meaningful way of distinguishing between gamers. Social identity theory privileges self-identification, and assumes self-identity is relative to perceptions of other groups (out-groups) with which they do not identify. For this reason, participants were asked to self-identify the type of gamer they represent. Self-reporting was

done by using a sliding scale ranging from 0 to 100, with the anchors “Casual,” “Average,” and “Hardcore” positioned above the 0-10, 50, and 90-100 points of the scale, respectively.

A total of 248 participants were involved in the study. However, only 213 surveys were completed in full and used for the data analysis.

Focus and Rationale for Study Two

Study I (Chapter II) focused on gamer perceptions of engagement practices enacted by AAA publishers and their own expectations for and perceptions of actual or anticipated engagement with these publishers. Study Two (Chapter III) extends the focus on engagement practices by examining texts produced by organizations that were designed to promote engagement (one-way marketing communication) as well as media descriptions of engagement practices of three publishers and consumers. To permit the examination of situations where consumer engagement may have been “provoked” by concerns over video game products, three cases of “failed” video games were selected for analysis. The promotional materials produced by the organizations as well as third-party, journalistic critiques of these three “failed” games were identified and systematically examined. By looking at adverse consumer events which are more likely to be visible and prompt engagement, Study Two contributes to our understanding of issues (themes) that arise during discussion about the games, including themes related to promotion and critique. Thus, Study Two (Chapter III) provides a qualitative analysis of online textual documents that depict business-to-consumer (B2C) engagement behaviors, as well as descriptions of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement behaviors by using online textual documents.

Research Questions. The research explores engagement behaviors regarding three negatively reviewed video games by consumers by using textual evidence from publisher websites and news articles. The following research questions are proposed for Study Two:

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in the publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are publisher reactions to consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

Method. The researcher selected three well-publicized case studies that exemplify the characteristics of perceived betrayals by the AAA publisher. These three video games were forecasted to be hits but were deemed as disappointments on their release. The video games are Electronic Arts' *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), and Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2016) that Sony Interactive Entertainment helped produce.

Study Two analyzes the text of online documents about the three games. Two types of documents were analyzed for Study Two—promotional materials and critiques. Promotional materials are the press releases taken from the video games' official websites about the video games themselves. The promotional materials range from those posted during the first press release of the game up until those published when the game is finally released. A total of 58 promotional material documents were analyzed (*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, $n=11$; *Star Wars Battlefront II*, $n=8$; *No Man's Sky*, $n=39$). The results for promotional materials explore how businesses engage and communicate with consumers (B2C).

The second type of document analyzed was critiques from professional video game trade journalists. Professional video game trade journalists are defined as paid journalists who write about the video game industry and gaming culture. A total of 21 critique documents were analyzed (Electronic Arts, $n=2$, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, $n=6$; *Star Wars Battlefront II*, $n=3$; *No Man's Sky*, $n=10$). The two separate Electronic Arts articles focus specifically on articles about the company and not a specific product. The results for critiques primarily explore how consumers engage with businesses (C2B), although some elements of C2C exist.

The text documents extracted online were imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to help with constant comparison analysis of the text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With the use of this approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), emergent themes were initially coded into nodes by using open coding or “[t]he process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 61). After identifying the themes, the researcher conducted a crosstab query to determine how the emergent themes were prevalent in each document type for each case. Crosstab queries will be explained in detail in Chapter III, and examples of crosstab query outputs for Study Two are shown in Appendix D.

Focus and Rationale for Study Three

While exploring the media comments about consumer engagement provides outside narratives of consumer engagement, it is just as important to explore consumer conversations between video game consumers. By observing consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement conversations, particularly how consumers respond to posts regarding video game topics, the research can identify and glean insights of issues that were most important to gamers. This analysis also allows for comparisons to the previous media narratives about gamers presented in Study Two (Chapter III).

Research Questions. Study Three (Chapter IV) is also a qualitative, text-based analysis that primarily examines consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement behavior on the social media platform Reddit. Though operating as a separate study, Study Three is an extension of Study Two; it examines texts from three forums related to the previously mentioned negatively reviewed games. The following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: How are consumer conversations about three negatively reviewed gamers enacted on Reddit forums?

The contents of these consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conversations are examined in order to identify topics and issues they raise concerning the three games. Later the contents are compared with the texts and issues identified in Study Two to identify similarities and differences in the themes evident in the journalists' discussions. Therefore, the second research question is proposed:

RQ2: How do consumer-to-consumer conversations on Reddit in Study Three compare to journalists' representations in Study Two?

Method. Three subreddits were chosen for analysis: r/MassEffectAndromeda, r/NoMansSky, and r/StarWarsBattlefront. These subreddits correspond to the negatively reviewed games. For these three video game subreddits, 10 posts (or threads) were selected based on community discussions related to the publisher and developer or on personal opinions about the game. Through its algorithm, Reddit labeled these posts as "Controversial" or "Hot" for "All Time" (i.e., since the creation of the subreddit), indicating there were substantial conversations and debate surrounding the thread. For each thread, up to 200 comments were analyzed, and these were filtered by Reddit's algorithm as the best comments. The details of the mechanisms and algorithms for Reddit are explained further in Chapter IV.

Threads and comments were extracted from Reddit using Google Sheets and exported in NVivo for constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), similar to the process used in Study Two. All 30 posts were coded into nodes based on the 30 original posts of the thread and the 2,455 filtered replies. Using themes from Study Two, the researcher conducted queries to code emergent themes. In the textual evidence from Reddit, new emergent themes were also coded.

After identifying the themes, the researcher conducted a crosstab query to determine how the emergent themes were prevalent in each subreddit. Examples of crosstab query outputs for Study Two are shown in Appendix E.

Overall, these three studies work together to contribute to engagement theory by helping researchers and practitioners alike understand how a presumably active consumer group, such as video game consumers, engage with businesses and other consumers. In answering the research questions and hypotheses through quantitative and qualitative analyses of survey and public data, the research will expand upon the current academic literature on stakeholder engagement and reveal perceptions and experiences of different types of gamers regarding industry engagement practice. Additionally, the textual evidence analysis of engagement not identifies issues addressed in engagement, it also suggests new ways to explore online evidence of engagement.

Conclusion

This dissertation examines the engagement practices of the video game industry and the consumers of these games, and to tensions that may arise from expectation gaps, as well as how video game consumers initiate and respond to organizational engagement practices. Within the context of strategic communication, engagement provides an opportunity to develop an orientation and practice that incorporates resources, measures, understandings, and values as

processes and outcomes of the engagement process. As industries continue to seek ways to engage with their consumers more directly, attempting to understand the often-conflicting expectations and experiences of numerous stakeholder groups within an industry is necessary.

CHAPTER II

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND AAA VIDEO GAME PUBLISHERS

Overview

The purpose of Study One was to examine gamers' perceptions of their own engagement experiences and their perceptions of the engagement practices of the AAA video game industry. Self-identified gamers were recruited through convenience sampling, and a quantitative analysis was used to address a series of research questions. The hypotheses and research questions were designed to identify differences in the ways three groups of gamers who self-reported their gamer type, perceived industry engagement practices as well as the way they performed engagement practice with publishers and other consumers. Because gamers, most notably "hardcore" gamers, are a consumer that often is portrayed as unique compared to other consumer groups (Balland et al., 2012; De Vaan et al., 2012; Tschang, 2007) especially in terms of their willingness to actively pursue engagement, studying three types of gamers provides an opportunity to study a wide range of perceptions and behaviors.

The organization of this chapter is as follows: (1) a brief review is presented of the literature previously discussed in Chapter I that is related to Study One, and hypotheses and research questions are identified; (2) the method used for Study One is discussed, including the recruitment of participants and the collection of data, the design of the survey, and an explanation of the measures; (3) the results for the hypotheses and research questions are provided; and (4) a brief discussion, including limitations and directions for future research, concludes the chapter.

Engagement Theory

Engagement can produce short- and long-term value through the development of committed consumer relationships. Organizations create value for stakeholders when they generate benefits or meet needs, such as the need for a useful, desired product or service, in ways that the stakeholders value. Thus, value creation by an organization is based on stakeholders' purchase decisions, which indicate that the organization is meeting stakeholder needs and fulfilling expectations. Stakeholders may reward companies that create value not only by purchasing their products but also by developing positive affective orientations toward the organization that manifest through consumer loyalty, positive posts on social media, and perceptions of the organization as a socially responsible and caring corporate citizen. Organizations correctly interpret these orientations as supportive stakeholder behaviors; however, signals related to value creation can be mixed because different types of consumers may have different expectations and experiences of engagement. Additionally, consumers may not necessarily self-identify as consumer groups in the same way organizations segment them as consumer groups. Also, stakeholder expectations and interests may change and evolve over time and thus require organization monitor value creations.

In business contexts, "engagement" has become a favored buzzword linked to socially responsible business practices and the intention to induce motivational and organizational change (Brodie et al., 2011). Organizations may be self-congratulatory when claiming to "practice engagement," though understanding of the potential and drawbacks may be limited. For example, some organizations may equate engagement to one-way communication, providing information to the consumer, but not expecting a reply back. The public has increasingly used two-way communication, particularly through social media to perform functions of engagement

(Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2017). Stakeholders may also value two-way relationships when these relationships create value for them both fiscally, behaviorally, and mentally. Thus, mutually beneficial relationships can be viewed as both a process and an outcome (J. E. Grunig, 2006). However, ideas about mutually beneficial relationships may vary among consumer segments.

The “success” of organizational engagement in this new public and media environment may be primarily dependent on the organization’s ability to effectively (and positively) engage stakeholders and to co-create meaning in ways that are valued by stakeholders. One form of engagement implemented by video game consumers involves not only playing video games but also discussing video games and watching livestreams of their favorite gamers on forums and through social media (W. Hamilton, Garretson, & Kerne, 2014). Therefore, the first set of hypotheses for Study One explore how the three types of self-identified gamers spend their time engaging with video games. The method for demarcating the three types of video game consumers used for the analyses is explained later, in the section on measures included in the study.

H1a: A monotonic relationship exists between playing video games non-professionally and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1b: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends in person about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1c: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends online about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1d: A monotonic relationship exists between participating in official video game forums and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1e: A monotonic relationship exists between discussing video games on social media and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1f: A monotonic relationship exists between watching Let's Plays and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1g: A monotonic relationship exists between watching professional video game competitions and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

Marketing research emphasizes the value of engagement in developing consumer relationships (Sashi, 2012) and in creating and conveying a social identity. Over the years, numerous researchers have attempted to segment gamers with varying results. Psychographic segmentation groups people according to their attitudes, interests, values and lifestyles whereas behavioral segmentation finds patterns in consumers' behavior toward or with a product (Boone & Kurtz, 2013). Many researchers have also relied on in-game demographics to determine customer segmentation (Boone & Kurtz, 2013). Refer to Appendix A to view how researchers have previously tried to segment and classify video game consumers.

When a consumer likes or identifies with a brand, it is likely they will spend money to support the brand (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014). Consumers may have different schemas related to how they display and perceive their identities, but most schemas are constructed based on three variables: loyalty (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978), attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Whan Park, 2005), and brand love (Ahuvia, 2005). Brand love "exists when desire

for the product reaches or extends beyond a threshold...self-brand integration is a construct of brand love” (Ahuvia, 2005; Wallace et al., 2014, p. 35). Engagement processes enable an organization to take the pulse of brand lovers and identifiers as well as to provide an opportunity to influence consumers.

Because previous research suggests that identity plays a key role in how consumers engage with a company, particularly how consumers might spend their monetary resources to support and show brand love, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: A monotonic relationship exists between the amount of disposable income spent on video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H3: A monotonic relationship exists between the likelihood of pre-ordering video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

While it is necessary to understand how a consumer may view ideal organizational engagement, it is equally necessary to determine how consumers perceive the present engagement practices of an organization. While some consumers may feel their expectations are met by an organization, others may feel that they are being ignored or engaged inappropriately. From an organizational perspective, a truly engaged organization attempts to understand and to meet the needs of their consumers; however, these needs are filtered through the lens of the organization’s needs, which always take precedence. Therefore, for this dissertation, it was crucial to solely focus on the expectations of consumers to determine whether the engagement of an organization (in this case, AAA video game companies) is adequate. The following hypotheses is proposed to examine these consumer wants and needs.

H4: A monotonic relationship exists between met wants and needs from video game publishers and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

Finally, it is necessary to identify the concerns that motivate video game consumers the most in engaging and influencing an organization. Hon and Grunig (1999) claimed that a relationship begins when consequences created by an organization affect the public and vice versa. Accordingly, generating authentic, appropriate, and timely responses to social expectations should be a priority for organizations, especially when an organization understands that the stakeholders prefer to allocate resources to companies they respect, to companies with whom they share values, and to companies that demonstrate concern for stakeholders. Meeting these relational expectations may facilitate the development of stronger positive feelings and behavioral intentions toward organizations. In consideration of authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness, the following research questions are proposed to assess perceptions of engagement:

RQ1: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of the importance of communication characteristics commonly associated with engagement practices (e.g., authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) with AAA video game publishers?

RQ2: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of specific engagement practices of AAA video game publishers?

Consumer Engagement

Van Doorn et al. (2010) states that “customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions and may be defined explicitly as a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 254). Previous research on consumer management has focused on the transactional characteristics of relationships (e.g., financial investments). Multiple researchers have also investigated the antecedents of customer behaviors (e.g., retention and cross-buying) and have developed methods to predict these behaviors (Verhoef et al., 2010). Customer lifetime value (CLV) and customer equity have been proposed as critical overarching customer metrics (Gupta et al., 2004; Gupta & Zeithaml, 2006; Rust et al., 2004; Venkatesan & Kumar, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2007). Despite the focus on the transactional factors of the relationship, word of mouth (WOM) as a form of non-transactional behavior has attracted considerable attention in the existing literature (Verhoef et al., 2002; Villanueva et al., 2008).

Kumar et al. (2010) strongly cautioned that ignoring customer engagement may lead to an undervaluation or overvaluation of customers. They introduced customer engagement value (CEV) as a new, overarching customer value metric that includes both value from transactions (CLV) and value from non-transactional behaviors. Importantly, they distinguished between three non-transactional values: customer referral value (CRV), customer influence value (CIV), and customer knowledge value (CKV). However, it is important to note there is some disagreement among scholars regarding the conceptualization of CEV. Kumar et al.’s (2010) conceptualization of CEV contradicts that of Van Doorn et al. (2010), who proposed that customer engagement only involves behaviors that go beyond transactions. Van Doorn et al. (2010) argued that CLV should remain the overarching customer value metric to which the value

resulting from customer engagement (i.e., CRV, CIV, and CKV) is added. Because there is disagreement, the study must favor one perspective over the other. For this study, the researcher favors van Doorn et al.'s interpretation of CLV, which argues that customer engagement involves behaviors that go beyond financial transactions but acknowledges that Kumar et al.'s (2010) interpretation should not be ignored due to the focus on transactional value. Therefore, it is essential to examine video game consumers' behaviors related to consumer engagement and to determine whether there are differences between gamer consumer groups. Moreover, it is important to determine whether game consumers' attitudes and behaviors differ from those discussed in previous research in relation to consumer behaviors.

RQ3: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in enacting consumer engagement behaviors?

Next, the more a consumer is satisfied, trusts, or identifies with a brand, the greater the opportunity for higher levels of engagement; however, the reverse can also be true in which dissatisfaction, distrust, and lack of identification may also lead to high levels of engagement.

Consumer consumption goals play a role in higher levels of engagement. For example, maximizing consumption benefits or relational benefits can influence how the brand is used by a consumer, and more importantly, in the ways consumers engage with the brand. It is important to note that sometimes the goals of a consumer may be unrelated to the actual brand or product but oriented toward the consumer base or market (e.g., engaging in helpful behaviors with other consumers and forming communities).

The resources and the perceived costs and benefits affect the level of CEBs and are based on consumers' amount of time, effort, and money devoted to a brand. While there may be extreme cases of people "over-investing" their resources, the brand is not concerned with this

and does not consider this a measurement of CEB unless it relates to a paracrisis or crisis, which is an extreme event in itself but not impossible.

While this dissertation explores how video game consumers enact CEBs, it is also necessary to examine the perceived frequency with which video game consumers have contacted an AAA video game publisher. In light of the varying importance that the three groups of gamers attach to their gamer identities, H4 offers a prediction regarding the perceived frequency of contact with publishers.

H5: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with publishers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher.

Organizations and companies also can influence CEB by providing platforms that support specific consumer actions, such as customer service phone numbers or social media accounts. Companies are also increasingly providing platforms for customer-to-customer engagement, including official social media groups and message boards and the facilitation of customer get-togethers.

To obtain insights into these types of CEB antecedents, the next hypothesis focuses on the perceptions that consumers may have toward businesses related to consumer engagement as well as how their engagement can be affected by the customer and the context-based antecedents.

H6: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with other consumers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types

of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher.

The perceived and actual characteristics of a brand can strongly influence CEBs. Brands with strong positive reputations and equity are associated with higher levels of positive CEB (De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Keller, 1998). Moreover, negative brand reputation and equity are correlated with negative CEB (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Both positive and negative CEBs can motivate people to engage, and a consumer can switch between positive and negative CEBs. Therefore, the next research question examines the positive and negative attitudes gamers may have toward AAA publishers.

RQ4: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in attitudes toward AAA video game publishers?

Consumer engagement has consequences for many different stakeholders, including customers, companies, and constituents. At the most basic level, the consequences for customers are cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral; however, resources and identity can also play roles in the consequences of CEB. If CEB efforts are successful, customers may engage more frequently and more intensively in CEB actions. If customer engagement is unsuccessful, in the long-term, the customer may switch to different engagement strategies.

CEBs also have consequences for organizations. First, there are financial consequences. Many CEBs' WOM behaviors and actions aimed at generating and disseminating information (e.g., blogging) can affect the purchase behavior and customer equity. Second, there are reputational consequences for organizations. Engaged customers contribute to the long-term reputation and recognition of the brand, as evidenced by participation in brand communities and supporting events related to the brand. Customers create and disseminate information related to

an organization and brand that can be used by others and can therefore enhance the reputation of the company in the long-term. Therefore, highly engaged customers can be a crucial source of knowledge for a brand or company and can be useful in generating ideas for the design and development of new products, suggesting modifications of existing brands, and engaging in trials of beta products. To explore both the positive and negative forms of engagement, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ5a: What types of problem-solving complaining behaviors do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) enact against an AAA video publisher?

RQ5b: What types of vindictive complaining/retaliatory behaviors do the three types of video game

Finally, while customer and company consequences are the focus when evaluating CEBs, it is prudent to understand the consequences of the CEBs of fellow consumers. In today's digital economy, the actions of an organization and its customers are often highly transparent and readily visible to customers of the organization as well as customers of other organizations. In particular, access to information about competitors—through CEBs such as blogs, publicly posted complaints, and suggestions—can further stimulate competition. In other instances, customers of different organizations can unite in ways that benefit the broader community with which they identify. The following research question is proposed to explore the different types of complaining behaviors that video game consumers may engage in.

RQ5c: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in complaining behaviors enacted with other video game consumers?

Because they can maintain and nurture relationships with other customers, brands, and organizations, CEBs may have a powerful influence on an organization and its brand.

Organizations should therefore proactively manage CEBs.

CEB is a useful framework for consumer segmentation because it includes multiple types of engagement behaviors. Previous literature on customer segmentation has always treated customer choice as the primary variable for analysis, but CEB also includes different varieties of engagement behaviors. However, CEBs can be used to express dissatisfaction and intention to withdraw support from the organization. Moreover, consumers may choose to share their negative experiences with other consumers as a form of retaliatory behavior. Thus, the following final research question concerning CEBs and retaliation behaviors is proposed.

RQ6: What types of retaliatory behaviors do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) enact against an AAA video game publisher?

In summary, organizations benefit from understanding how segmented consumers behave in different contexts, and maximize their profitability, by developing personalized strategies directed at specific consumer segments (Van Doorn et al., 2010). To understand how segmented consumers may engage, the following section describes the method used to address the hypotheses and research questions, including: recruitment procedures, participants, and measures.

Method

For Study One, data collected via a cross-sectional survey was used to examine respondents' engagement practices with game publishers and other consumers. The questions were designed to assess how respondents perceived themselves as video game consumers as well

as to assess their engagement experiences with AAA video game publishers and other consumers. Because engagement should be viewed as two-way communication, it is important to understand consumer perceptions of industry engagement practices, including engagement initiated by publishers and engagement initiated by consumers. The survey was developed using the Qualtrics software system provided by Texas A&M University.

Recruitment Procedures

Following TAMU IRB approval, which was granted on January 22, 2018, the survey participants were recruited through multiple venues, including the social media accounts of the researcher (Facebook and Twitter). Participants were also recruited through the Department of Communication's Participant Pool, where a series of pre-screening questions related to the purchase of AAA video games was used to identify participants who fit the desired consumer characteristics required for this project. Specifically, potential respondents were asked if they had purchased a video game from an AAA publisher for their own personal use in the last three years. Participants were also recruited from multiple universities through instructors who taught classes that focused on the study of gaming and the creation of video games. The participants were required to be 18 years or older and to be able to read and write in English. There was no external incentive for participation.

Participants were also recruited through the social media web aggregator Reddit, which is a social aggregation and discussion website where registered members submit links, text posts, and upload images (Straub-Cook, 2017). Though Reddit contributors must be registered to participate in the community, the majority of threads are open to public viewing. Reddit has become a common tool and method used to recruit participants and to collect data (Shatz, 2017). Reddit has the advantage of a more diverse sampling pool than a traditional, in-person sample

and offers benefits similar to Amazon MTurk regarding sample diversity, the reliability of measures, and the validity of data (Jamnik & Lane, 2017). The researcher posted a recruitment thread on the page r/SampleSize, a community specifically designed for researchers (academic, marketing, or casual) to recruit participants for surveys and interviews. Currently, the community has about 57,744 potential participants. Links to the survey were also posted in the general gaming communities of Reddit. In addition, the researcher distributed the link to the survey on the websites Survey Circle and Survey Tandem. These websites help researchers recruit participants by participating in surveys themselves. The more surveys they complete, the greater the number of participants invited to the researcher's survey. Finally, at the end of the survey, the researcher requested that participants share the survey link with any interested parties, potentially recruiting participants through "snowball sampling" (Goodman, 1961; Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is when previous participants are asked to voluntarily recruit new participants for the same study, expanding the recruitment pool.

Participants

A total of 248 participants took part in the study; however, only 213 surveys were completed in full and used for the data analysis. The sample was composed of 62.9% male respondents ($n = 134$), 33.8% female respondents ($n = 72$), and 3.3% "beyond the binary" or preferred not to reveal their gender respondents ($n = 7$). The age ranges for participants were as follows: 18-24 (64.8%, $n = 138$), 25-34 (24.9%, $n = 53$), 35-44 (8%, $n = 17$), and 45 or older or preferred not to reveal their age (2.4%, $n = 5$). Finally, 4.7% of participants were high school graduates ($n = 10$), 42.7% were either attending college or had earned college credit ($n = 91$), 5.2% had a two-year degree ($n = 11$), 28.6% had a four-year degree ($n = 61$), 9.9% had a professional degree ($n = 21$), and 8.9% had a doctorate degree ($n = 19$).

Measures

The survey used for Study One contained a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions to allow for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data (see Appendix B); however, only quantitative elements were used to address the research questions and hypotheses in Study One. As described in the next section, the majority of survey items were drawn from previously established instruments. In some cases, items were created by the researcher to reflect the purposes of the study.

Descriptions of video game activities. To encourage respondents to reflect on their game-related activities prior to answering questions pertaining to the analyses, the first two sections of the instrument asked respondents about game-related activities and game preferences. The first section of questions asked participants to report their participation in video game playing and game-related activities (e.g., playing video games non-professionally, participating in official video game forums, and watching Let's Plays and/or livestreams of video games). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The participants also reported how often they played various types of games on video consoles or computers (e.g., platform, first-person shooters, simulation, MMOs, and puzzles). The answer options were based on a 7-point Likert-type frequency ranging from "never" to "a great deal."

The participants were asked to report the amount of their disposable incomes used to purchase video game products and services (5-point Likert scale), whether they were likely to pre-order a video game (7-point Likert scale), and whether they felt that AAA video game publishers were meeting their needs and expectations of video game products and services (5-point Likert scale).

Social Identification of Gamer Type. As discussed in Chapter I, social identity theory helps explain how people develop perceptions of themselves—identities—as members of various groups and how the self-perceptions influence their individual perceptions and behaviors as well as their perceptions and behaviors toward others. Thus, social identity is an individual’s self-concept derived from membership in social groups (Tajfel, 1978). The social identity theory (SIT) assumes that identity is derived primarily from group memberships. It also proposes that people strive to achieve or to maintain a positive social identity, thus boosting their self-esteem. According to social identity theory, those who people perceive as belonging to the same group as they are termed in-group members. Out-groups members are individuals who are perceived to be different from themselves. A positive identity is mostly derived from favorable comparisons made between the ingroup and the relevant out-groups. Mullen, Brown, and Smith (1992) found that within communities, it is typical for group members to believe that their group is superior to other groups and there should be discrimination between groups. Research suggests that media fandoms, including video games, music, film, books, and television, constitute aspects of one’s social identity, perceiving their fandoms as distinct entities and forming ingroups while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from outgroups (Groene & Hettinger, 2016; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Voci, 2006).

Given the prominence of discussions of “gamer identity” in the literature (see Appendix A for examples), it was important to ask participants how they perceived their own identities (in-group membership) as they compared to other gamers’ identities (out-groups). The academic and professional literature on gaming often classifies gamers according to certain criteria that may be important to the research purposes but that are not viewed as relevant to gamers themselves (Shaw, 2010). Rather than relying on classifications imposed by marketers, game developers,

and similar professionals, the researcher determined that allowing participants to self-report how they viewed themselves as gamers was more consistent with social identity theory than other approaches to classifying consumers.

Moreover, an informal pilot test with gamers who were not included in the sample confirmed the importance of allowing gamers to classify themselves into a gamer type. Pilot test participants also reported that the anchors on the sliding scale were correct and the three answer options (casual, average, and hardcore) seemed appropriate to their self-conceptions as well as conceptions of other gamer types (out-group members). The question “Using the sliding scale below, how would you describe yourself as a gamer?” enabled them to report their gamer identities. The sliding scale ranged from 0 to 100, and the anchors “Casual,” “Average,” and “Hardcore” were positioned above the 0-10, 50, and 90-100 points of the scale, respectively.

Given the centrality of self-perceptions of gamer types to the hypotheses and research questions concerning engagement, it was important to prime participants’ thinking about *themselves as gamers*. As a warm-up, the participants were asked to report how they would describe the characteristics (behaviors and attitudes) of three types of gamers: casual, average, and hardcore. The three categories, or descriptors, of video gamers were chosen due to their frequent use in video game communities to describe other gamers, often in a derogatory fashion (e.g., “filthy casuals”); however, because marketing segmentation and even identification in gaming communities rely on ordinal descriptions, participants were classified as either casual, average, or hardcore to help answer the research questions.

The difficulty in analyzing data that require identity self-reporting, particularly for a convenience sample, is that self-reporting could produce significantly skewed data due to self-selected participation in the research. Moreover, the purposes of this research study required

comparisons among the participants that comprise gamer groups. However, in line with the social identity theory, the researcher believed empowering participants through the opportunity to self-identify relative to the anchors on the sliding scale outweighed the risks of unequal sub-sample sizes. Considerable attention was devoted to ensuring that self-classifications would privilege their own views of themselves because the gamer groups would serve as the independent variable for most analyses.

Engagement Concepts. The first set of questions concerning engagement concepts asked participants to report how they perceived the importance of four components of engagement: authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness. These four components are associated with previous literature on engagement (Boyd, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men & Tsai, 2014). As a warm-up for each open-ended engagement question, participants were asked to describe what “ideal engagement” would entail related to AAA video game publishers (e.g., “How would you describe ideal ‘authentic interaction’ with an AAA publisher?”). Next, participants reported the *importance* of the engagement concept using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “not at all important” to “extremely important” (e.g., “How important to you is authentic communication with an AAA publisher?”). These four engagement terms were not defined in the questions. Respondents relied on their own interpretations of the terms.

The second set of questions concerning engagement concepts asked participants to report their perceptions of AAA video game publishers’ behaviors related to specific engagement behaviors. Six questions were developed based on the academic operationalizations of the four engagement concepts presented in the previous section. Participants were provided with questions that contained key characteristics of a scholar’s definition of a particular aspect of engagement; however, participants were blind to the specific engagement concept to which the

question referred. For example, for the concept of “authenticity,” this item was used: “When responding to consumer concerns, is the communication by AAA video game publishers consistent with their values, beliefs, and mission?” The concept of consistency with “values, beliefs, and mission” was drawn from a scholarly operationalization of behaviors that represent authentic communication. Similarly, the concept of “transparency” was assessed with one item that included a definition of transparency: “When responding to consumer concerns, do AAA video game publishers communicate valid information about their products and services?” The engagement concepts “legitimacy” and “responsiveness” were represented by two questions because each of the scholar-supplied definitions had contained two parts of analysis. The item “When responding to consumer concerns, does the communication by AAA video game publishers illustrate ethical communication practices with consumers?” reflected legitimate communication, and the item “When responding to consumer concerns, do AAA video game publishers quickly respond to feedback and concerns?” reflected responsiveness. These six engagement questions included 5-point Likert-type answer options ranging from “never” to “always.”

Consumer Engagement Scale. The next section of the survey contained the Consumer Engagement Scale that was created and validated by Kumar and Pansari (2016). Kumar and Pansari (2016) defined Consumer Engagement (CE) using Van Doorn et al.’s (2010) definition, “a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 254). Kumar and Pansari’s (2016) scale offers a framework that organizations can use to evaluate the engagement of their customers. The scale also provides a strong theoretical rationale and empirical evidence for the positive impact of high engagement scores on organizational performance. The participants reported on four constructs

that comprise consumer engagement: purchases or customer lifetime value (CLV), referrals or customer referral value (CRV), influence or customer influence value (CIV), and knowledge or customer knowledge value (CKV). Statements from Kumar and Pansari (2016) were altered to refer to AAA video game publishers and products specifically. For example, the phrasing of an original item was altered from “I will continue buying the products/services of this brand in the near future” to “I will continue buying products/services from the video game industry in the near future.” Participants reported their engagement experiences using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

The concept of CLV asserts that when customers purchase products or services from an organization, they directly contribute to the organization’s value (Gupta et al., 2004). Kumar, Venkatesan, Bohling, and Beckmann (2008) presented an example of how the company IBM used CLV to reallocate \$20 million of revenue without any changes in the level of marketing investment. Four CLV items, as well as items on the other scales, were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The CLV items included “I will continue buying the products/services of this brand in the near future” and “Owning the products/services of this brand makes me happy.” The item “I do not get my money’s worth when I purchase this brand” was reversed coded. The Cronbach’s alpha for the CLV scale was .88.

CRV involves the belief that referred customers are more profitable than non-referred customers (Schmitt, Skiera, & Van den Bulte, 2011). Customers with the most purchase transactions might influence other customers or might provide feedback to organizations; however, customers with the most purchase transactions do not always provide the most referrals (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2010). Four items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale to

assess CRV. The items included “In addition to the value derived from the product, the monetary referral incentives also encourage me to refer this brand to my friends and relatives” and “Given that I use this brand, I refer my friends and relatives to this brand because of the monetary referral incentives.” The Cronbach’s alpha for CRV was .87.

CIV “describes the impact the customer makes on social media” (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 500). Social media platforms have more direct impacts on brand communities, and they lead to higher customer engagement compared with traditional marketing methodologies (Trusov et al., 2009). Four items were used to measure CIV on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The items included: “I love talking about my brand experience” and “I discuss the benefits that I get from this brand with others.” The item “I do not actively discuss this brand on any media” was reversed coded. The Cronbach’s alpha for CIV was .81.

Finally, CKV refers to a current customer’s active involvement in improving a company’s products or services by providing feedback and suggestions. Customers add value by helping organizations understand customer preferences and by participating in the knowledge development process (Joshi & Sharma, 2004). Four items were used to measure CKV on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The items included were “I provide feedback about my experiences with the brand to the firm” and “I provide suggestions/feedback about the new products/services of the brand.” The Cronbach’s alpha for CKV was .83.

For this dissertation, all participants completed the CLV, CIV, and CKV measures; however, the CRV measure was only relevant for participants who livestreamed video games for monetary benefit. A screening question asked, “Do you play or record/livestream yourself playing video games for income?” Only those receiving compensation for play completed the four CRV items.

Communicating a Concern to Publishers and Other Gamers. Next, participants were asked to report the frequency with which they communicated concerns related to products and services to AAA publishers and other gamers. First, respondents answered the question: “How often have YOU personally communicated a concern about a video game product or service to a video game publisher?” The next item used the same phrasing but asked them to report how often they had personally communicated a concern related to a video game product or service to other gamers. The responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “I have never personally communicated a concern” to “I always communicate about my concerns.”

The next section asked respondents to imagine a scenario in which they were “upset about a video game or service that did not meet [their] expectations.” After prompting them to imagine the scenario, they read the following question stem: “I would personally communicate a concern to a video game publisher if a newly released product...” followed by seven (potential) issues with video games that could create a reason for communicating a concern. The seven specific reasons were: overpriced, graphical or technical glitches, overpriced downloadable content (DLC), microtransactions, misleading promotional materials, did not seem ready for release, and required extra accessories not available with the game purchase. These reasons were chosen because they are frequent complaints regarding video game products in the gaming community. Participants also recorded their level of agreement with “I would personally communicate a concern...” on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

The set of questions concerning specific reasons for communicating concerns to publishers was followed by a parallel section that asked about communicating concerns related to a newly released product to other gamers: “I would personally communicate a concern to

other gamers if a newly released product...” followed by the same set of seven concerns and response options.

Attitudes toward Businesses. A measure created by Keng et al. (1995) was used to gauge participants’ attitudes toward the behaviors of AAA publishers. This particular scale is useful because the research underlying its development argues that complaint behavior should be used as an opportunity to enhance marketing effectiveness, and therefore it identifies issues with which businesses should be concerned. The ten statements assessed the respondents’ perceptions of business responsiveness to complaint actions and their opinions regarding business practices. The statements include positive perceptions of businesses (e.g., “Firms usually are willing to replace faulty products”) and negative perceptions (e.g., “Store employees are often quite unpleasant to customers who return unsatisfactory products”). For the purposes of this study, items were specifically adapted to reflect attitudes toward video game publishers. Participants were given the stem “I feel most AAA video game publishers:” followed by the attitudes toward businesses items. The participants reported their attitudes toward company behaviors on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The item “Most firms make an effort to ensure good condition of their goods” was inadvertently omitted from the survey, so participants only responded to nine statements. Negative perceptions of businesses, including “Most businesses will cheat you if you don’t stand up for your rights” and “Firms take a long time to respond to a complaint,” were reverse coded.

Retaliation. Finally, participants reported their reparation behaviors and retaliatory behaviors through a retaliation measure developed by Grégoire and Fisher (2008). Retaliatory behaviors are the efforts made by consumers to cause inconveniences to a company (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). It is important to note that retaliation differs from reparation. Reparation occurs

when consumers seek to improve their situations, whereas retaliation is motivated by a desire to “bring down” a company (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). Thus, the measure includes items related to problem-solving behaviors that could be initiated by consumers. The measure is rooted in a justice-based theory that uses theories of betrayal as a means to understand why customers retaliate despite previous loyalty (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Grégoire and Fisher’s work argues that betrayal (real or perceived) is a fundamental motivational force that leads customers to take actions to restore fairness, and as such, it provides new insights into why customers retaliate.

There are two dimensions of Grégoire and Fisher’s (2008) scale: demands for reparation and retaliatory behaviors. Demands for reparation refer to “a positive mechanism for restoring fairness and refers to anything a service firm provides to customers in order to compensate them for the failure and to redress their grievances” (p. 248). There are two specific types of behaviors for demands of reparation: problem-solving complaining and third-party complaining. Problem-solving complaining “constitutes a customer’s effort to contact a firm in order to find a solution to their problem,” whereas third-party complaining is defined as “a customer’s effort to consult a consumer agency or legal counsel to gain assistance in reaching a settlement with a firm” (p. 248). Problem-solving complaining involves the consumer directly working with a company, whereas third-party complaining involves complaining to other consumers or an organization that will utilize resources to address a situation, such as the Better Business Bureau.

Aside from the demand for reparation, there are three specific types of retaliatory behavior: vindictive complaining, negative WOM, and third-party complaining for publicity (i.e., to attract public attention to the problem). Vindictive complaining occurs “when customers contact a firm to inconvenience and abuse its employees” (p. 249). Of the behaviors, vindictive

complaining is the least studied because many of these behaviors are illegal and are therefore infrequently used by consumers (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Spreading negative WOM is “a customer’s efforts to denigrate a firm to their family and acquaintances” (p. 249); it functions as an indirect form of retaliation. Finally, third-party complaining for publicity occurs when consumers inform the public about the number and types of complaints against organizations, whether it be their own or others’ complaints.

Items used to examine demands for reparation and retaliatory behaviors were measured on 7-point Likert scales. For demands for reparation, problem-solving complaining was reported in three items adapted from Hibbard, Kumar, and Stern (2001), including “I complained to the airline in order to constructively discuss the problem” ($\alpha = .80$). Third-party complaining was measured by four items developed by Grégoire and Fisher (2008), including “I complained to the CTA so it could advise me on the best way to reach a settlement” ($\alpha = .89$). For retaliatory behaviors, vindictive complaining was measured by three items adapted from Hibbard et al. (2001). These items include “I complained to the airline in order to give the representatives a hard time” ($\alpha = .76$). For negative WOM, a three-item scale was adapted from Wangenheim (2005), which included items such as “I spread negative word-of-mouth about the airline company” ($\alpha = .76$). Finally, third-party complaining about negative publicity was measured by four newly developed items by Grégoire & Fisher (2008), including “I complained to the CTA to have it report my experience to other travelers” ($\alpha = .86$).

The participants responded to items related to problem complaining, vindictive complaining, negative WOM, and third-party complaining for publicity on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The items were modified to relate the statements to the video game industry (e.g., “I complained to the airline in order to constructively

discuss the problem” became “I would complain to an AAA video game publisher to constructively discuss the problem”). The constructs were divided by communication with businesses (problem-solving complaining and vindictive complaining) and communication with other gamers (negative WOM and third-party complaining for negative publicity). For negative WOM, one item was omitted because the statement was specifically related to an airline practice that was not transferable to the video game industry.

In addition to Grégoire and Fisher’s (2008) instrument, a series of items was developed by the researcher to assess a range of actions that consumers might take against a video game publisher due to a negative engagement experience. The item content was designed to reflect examples of anti-publisher/anti-game behaviors that have been reported within the gaming community. The responses were reactions to the statement “If an AAA video game publisher does not acknowledge or disregards my complaint after contact regarding a video game product or service, I would...” Some items included were “Start an activist campaign against the publisher,” “Troll and harass other players in a game to disrupt service,” and “Make a fake emergency call about the publishers and its representatives (i.e., SWATting).” The items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Lastly, the survey also included items to capture basic demographics: gender, age, and education level.

Results

This section explains preliminary data analysis and reports the results the determination of gamer group classifications. Results of the statistical tests used to address the research questions and hypotheses are presented. All test reports and tables are provided in Appendix C.

Preliminary Data Analysis

Prior to addressing the specific hypotheses and research questions, the data set was examined to identify missing values and to understand the general shape of the variable distributions. Because the self-reports of gamer identity would serve as the independent variable for several analyses, careful attention was paid to this variable and to the way groups should be established. The sliding scale used to report gamer identity included intervals marked by “casual,” “average,” and “hardcore.” Because respondents had an opportunity to work with the sliding scale and to provide their own self-definitions, their assessments could vary from 0-100. Gamer labels appeared on the scale and were used to divide the responses on the 100-point scale into gamer types. Beginning in the middle of the scale, the “average” label was above 50, the “casual” label from 0-10, and the hardcore label from 90-100. Following the directions, respondents positioned the scale such that it corresponded to their identities. For this reason, it was not appropriate to simply divide the distribution of responses into three groups with equal n sizes or even to rely on the emergent data distribution itself to determine groupings. In line with the concepts underpinning SIT, the researcher determined it was most appropriate to use the self-reports relative to the ordinal scale labels and numbering. Thus, it was determined that using the criteria of 0 to 30, 31 to 70, and 71 to 100 would be most appropriate to honor the self-descriptions.

When these ranges were used to identify casual, average, and hardcore gamer identities, the resulting n sizes were 68 ($M = 16.76$, $Mdn = 18$, and $SD = 10.36$), 93 ($M = 57.38$, $Mdn = 60$, and $SD = 10.96$), and 52 ($M = 80.77$, $Mdn = 80$, and $SD = 8.02$), respectively. For aggregate data, the descriptive statistics were $M = 50.12$, $Mdn = 60$, and $SD = 26.68$.

Though the simple descriptive statistics within groups initially did not initially appear to be problematic, the subsequent tests of between group distributions and variances of dependent variables indicated that the use of parametric tests, such as a one-way ANOVA and MANOVA, would be inappropriate due to the violation of primary assumptions. The descriptive statistics revealed violations for nearly all survey variables.

Because the three gamer type groups, which represented the independent variable, were at the ordinal level, it was appropriate to use nonparametric trend tests to examine research questions and hypotheses. Trend tests consider the ordinal nature of the independent variable and are thus more powerful than tests that rely on categorical-level variables; however, in cases in which trend effects were not anticipated, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. Though reliance on nonparametric statistics is not ideal, it was determined that more conservative statistical analyses would provide more accurate results for the research questions and hypotheses. The total n size for the analyses was 213.

Descriptions of Video Game Activities

A series of hypotheses are associated with H1. H1 predicted monotonic trends between the three gamer groups regarding multiple activities related to video gaming. Jonckheere-Terpstra tests, a type of trend test, were used to compare group responses for each dependent variable.

For the variable “playing video games, non-professionally” (H1a), the overall test statistic was significant ($T_{JT} = 10,730.00$, $z = 7.43$, $p < .001$), and the mean ranks for all groups differed significantly from the other groups in the expected direction. The Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons was used to adjust for multiple pairwise tests. The mean ranks for hardcore, average, and casual gamers were 145.49, 112.80, and 69.64, respectively. The results

confirmed H1a and demonstrated that hardcore gamers are most dedicated to playing video games.

The H1b variable, “talking with friends in person about games,” was significant ($T_{JT} = 10,510.00, z = 6.73, p < .001$). The follow-up tests using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated statistically significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 68.78), average (*mean rank* = 117.02), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 139.07) gamer groups. H1b is supported; all three gamer types differ from the others and hardcore gamers are more likely to talk with their friends in person about video games.

The next variable, “talking with friends online about games” (H1c), was found to be significant ($T_{JT} = 10,563.00, z = 6.74, p < .001$) with statistically significant differences between all groups: casual (*mean rank* = 68.78), average (*mean rank* = 117.02), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 139.07) gamer groups. Thus, H1c is supported.

For the fourth variable, “participating in official video game forums” (H1d), the overall test was significant ($T_{JT} = 10,105.500, z = 5.82, p < .001$). Pairwise follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction revealed a significant difference between hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 135.61) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 72.79, $p < .001$) and between average gamers (*mean rank* = 116.02) and casual gamers ($p < .001$). Average gamers did not differ significantly from hardcore gamers. H1d is partially supported. The results indicate that average gamers and hardcore gamers are just as likely to participate in official video game forums.

Significant differences were identified between groups for the variable “discussing video games on social media” (H1e) was found to be significant ($T_{JT} = 10,136.00, z = 5.84, p < .001$). The pairwise follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction revealed a significant difference between hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 133.44) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 70.78, $p <$

.001) and between average gamers (*mean rank* = 118.70) and casual gamers ($p < .001$). Average gamers did not differ significantly from hardcore gamers. H1e is partially supported, and the results indicate that average gamers and hardcore gamers are just as likely to discuss video games on social media.

For the variable “watching Let’s Plays” (H1f), the overall test statistic was significant ($T_{JT} = 9,482.00, z = 4.47, p < .001$). The pairwise follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction revealed a significant difference between hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 128.29) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 80.61, $p < .001$) and between average gamers (*mean rank* = 114.39) and casual gamers ($p = .001$). Average gamers did not differ significantly from hardcore gamers. H1f is partially supported, and the results indicate that average gamers and hardcore gamers are just as likely to watch Let’s Plays.

Finally, the variable “watching professional video game competitions” (H1g) was found to be significant ($T_{JT} = 9,737.50, z = 5.03, p < .05$), with statistically significant differences between all three groups: casual (*mean rank* = 82.99), average (*mean rank* = 106.99), and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 138.56). H1g is supported.

In summary, all the hypotheses were at least partially supported, and each test indicated that casual gamers were significantly different from average and hardcore gamers. Based on the results thus far, it will be interesting to analyze comparisons, particularly those related to engaging and socializing with other consumers.

Disposable Income, Pre-Ordering, and Meeting Wants and Needs

H2 predicted a monotonic trend between the three gamer groups for both disposable income and the likelihood of pre-ordering video games. Jonckheere-Terpstra trend tests were used to compare the group responses for each variable. For the question “How much of your

disposable income do you spend on products and services related to video games,” the overall test statistic was significant ($T_{JT} = 11,038.50, z = 8.26, p < .001$), and the mean ranks for all groups differed significantly from the other groups in the expected direction. The Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons was used to adjust for multiple pairwise tests. The mean ranks for hardcore, average, and casual gamers were 149.77, 113.07, and 65.99, respectively. The results confirmed H2. The amount spent on video games and services showed a monotonic increase across the three groups.

H3 predicted a monotonic trend between groups for the likelihood of pre-ordering a video game before its release. The overall test was significant ($T_{JT} = 9,736.00, z = 5.06, p < .001$), and all pairwise tests were significant. The follow-up tests using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated statistically significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 79.91), average (*mean rank* = 111.89), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 133.57) gamer groups. As expected, the tests for both H2 and H3 indicated that financial investment is associated with gamers’ self-reported identities.

H4 predicted a decreasing monotonic response trend for the item assessing the extent to which they believed AAA video game publishers were meeting their wants and needs as consumers. This prediction was based on the premise that casual, average, and hardcore gamers have different wants and needs due to their identities as gamers. Because the salience of gamer identity as well as the material, social, and psychological investment in gaming were expected to be lower (i.e., less important) for casual gamers, H4 predicted casual gamers were more likely to report their expectations were met. The overall test showed a statistical significance ($T_{JT} = 6,134.00, z = -2.62, p < .001$); however, pairwise follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction revealed a significant difference only between hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 89.94) and casual

gamers (*mean rank* = 118.97, $p < .05$). Average gamers (*mean rank* = 107.78) did not differ significantly from either hardcore or casual gamers. Thus, H3 is only partially supported.

Engagement Concepts

Perceptions of the importance of the four concepts linked with engagement practices were examined. RQ1 asks whether gamer groups differ in the importance they attach to authentic, transparent, legitimate, and responsive communication with an AAA publisher. The responses to the item “How important to you is authentic interaction from an AAA publisher?” were evaluated using the Kruskal-Wallis H test. The overall test for authentic communication was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 30.50, p < .001$), as were the follow-up comparisons. Significant differences were observed between casual (*mean rank* = 75.57), average (*mean rank* = 115.04), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 113.71) gamer groups. The pairwise differences are significant at $p < .001$.

The item assessing the perceived importance of transparent communication with AAA publishers revealed a statistically significant overall effect ($\chi^2 (2) = 33.76, p < .001$). Pairwise tests using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between all three groups: casual (*mean rank* = 77.91), average (*mean rank* = 108.55), and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 142.26). All pairwise differences are significant at $p < .001$.

The importance of legitimate communication with an AAA publisher differed significantly between gamer groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 24.42, p < .001$). Follow-up tests using the Bonferroni correction indicated that hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 139.69) differed from average (*mean rank* = 104.33) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 85.65). The differences were significant at $p < .001$; however, the importance of legitimate communication was similar for average and casual gamers.

The overall test for the item “How important to you is responsive communication from an AAA publisher?” revealed a statistically significant difference among the groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 15.05$, $p < .001$). Follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction demonstrated that casual gamers (*mean rank* = 85.11) differed from average (*mean rank* = 112.54) and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 125.72). The differences were significant at $p < .001$; however, responses for average gamers and hardcore gamers were not significantly different.

Overall, RQ1 explored general “buzzwords” associated with company-to-consumer engagement. Because the engagement terms were not defined for respondents, the answers reflect their subjective meanings of these concepts. The results for RQ1 suggest that there were few differences between the three groups regarding the importance of engagement. In most cases, average and hardcore gamers considered engagement concepts to be more important than casual gamers, suggesting that the more consumers identify as gamers, the more likely they are to consider engagement with a video game publisher to be important.

RQ2 expanded on respondents’ perceptions of engagement through six items that explicitly operationalized the four engagement concepts from RQ1. The extent of the groups’ agreement with the statements regarding how AAA publishers communicate when responding to consumer concerns was examined using Kruskal-Wallis tests. The item contents reflected specific aspects of engagement communication referenced in the scholarly literature.

Responses to the question “When responding to consumer concerns, is the communication by AAA video game publishers generally consistent with their values, beliefs, and mission?” were examined. The content of the item referred to the concept of authentic communication. The overall test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 6.45$, $p = .04$); however, follow-up tests using the Bonferroni correction indicated that only the difference between hardcore (*mean rank* =

90.91) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 118.32) reached significance at $p = .04$. Average gamers did not differ significantly from hardcore or casual gamers.

One item provided an operationalization of transparency in communication engagement. The analysis for the item “Do AAA video game publishers communicate valid information about their products and services?” produced a statistically significant overall test result ($\chi^2 (2) = 6.88$, $p = .03$). Pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed that only the hardcore (*mean rank* = 93.16) and casual (*mean rank* = 120.66) gamer groups differed significantly.

Two items operationalized the concept of legitimacy. The first item was “When responding to consumer concerns, does the communication by AAA video game publishers show that they actively participate in acquiring, distributing, and creating knowledge for their products and services?” The overall test was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.31$, $p = .31$). The second transparency question, “Does the communication by AAA video game publishers illustrate ethical communication practices with consumers,” also failed to produce a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 (2) = 5.03$, $p = .81$). Neither transparency variable distinguished between the three gamer groups.

Two items operationalized the concept of responsiveness. The overall tests for both items failed to identify statistically significant differences. The variable “When responding to consumer concerns, do AAA video game publishers quickly answer those feedback and concerns” did not reveal differences between the groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 3.51$, $p = .17$). Second, responses to “When responding to consumer concerns, do AAA video game publishers appropriately address those concerns?” did not indicate differences between the groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 4.69$, $p = .09$).

RQ2 explored participant perceptions of AAA video game publisher behaviors related to four engagement concepts: authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness. Summarizing the results for RQ2, there was a significant difference between casual gamers and hardcore gamers for both the authenticity item (“generally consistent with their values, beliefs, and mission”) and the transparency item (“publishers communicate valid information about their products and services”). However, for the same items, there was no significant difference between casual and average gamers, or average and hardcore gamers. For the items related to legitimacy and responsiveness, there were no significant differences between groups.

Overall, RQ1 and RQ2 examine perceptions of engagement from two different perspectives: characteristics of engagement and practices of engagement. For characteristics of engagement (RQ1), average and hardcore participants were more likely to find these characteristics important, compared to casual gamers. However, for practices of engagement (RQ2), while there was a significant difference between casual and hardcore gamers regarding authentic and transparent practices, participants did not seem to differ in their perceptions for AAA publishers’ legitimacy and responsiveness practices.

Consumer Engagement Scale

RQ3 was addressed by examining consumer engagement behaviors. The consumer engagement instrument was comprised of four components: (1) CLV, (2) CIV, (3) CKV, and (4) CRV. A question was used to screen respondents to determine whether they played video games or recorded/livestreamed themselves playing video games for income. The screening question was important for the assessment of CRV component because the specific CRV items are related to monetary benefits conferred by the company. Of the 213 participants, only three answered questions related to CRV. Therefore, the CRV scale was excluded from the analysis. Internal

consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for the remaining scales. By dropping one item from the CLV scale ("I do not get my money's worth when I purchase this brand"), the scale reliability was raised from .68 to .84. The reliabilities for CIV (four items) and CKV (four items) were .80 and .96, respectively.

Using the Kruskal-Wallis test, the overall test for the composite consumer engagement scale was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 73.66, p < .001$), as were the pairwise comparisons. Follow-up comparisons with the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons revealed significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 57.84), average (*mean rank* = 117.91), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 146.31) gamer groups. The differences were significant at $p < .005$. The remaining three components of the overall consumer engagement scale were examined separately to differentiate between specific forms of CEBs.

The overall effect for CLV was significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 37.58, p < .001$). The follow-up tests using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons indicated that casual gamers (*mean rank* = 71.24) differed from average (*mean rank* = 116.24) and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 136.57). The differences were significant at $p < .001$; however, the responses of average gamers were not significantly different from those of hardcore gamers.

The overall test for CIV was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 66.78, p < .001$). The follow-up comparisons using the Bonferroni correction demonstrated that all three groups differed significantly from the others. The differences between casual (*mean rank* = 59.48), average (*mean rank* = 119.03), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 147.62) gamer groups were significant at $p < .005$.

Finally, the omnibus test for CKV was significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 38.22, p < .001$). The follow-up comparisons with the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated significant

differences between casual (*mean rank* = 72.79), average (*mean rank* = 112.92), and hardcore (*mean rank* = 141.14) gamer groups. Thus, all gamer group differences for CKV were significant at $p < .005$.

In sum, to address RQ3, analyses of the three components of the customer engagement instrument indicated that hardcore gamers were the most likely to engage in each of the three consumer behaviors assessed via the scales. With the exception of CLV, where hardcore gamers did not differ significantly from average gamers, the patterns of mean ranks demonstrated that hardcore gamers were most likely to report participating in these forms of engagement, while casual gamers were least likely to report performing the behaviors. Thus, the post-hoc analyses demonstrated a monotonic trend between gamer type responses and seemed to suggest that consumer-to-business engagement practices are more common among hardcore gamers, the group whose identities are more closely aligned with gaming.

Communicating a Concern to Publishers and Other Gamers

H5 and H6 predict increasing monotonic trends for the analyses of the frequencies with which the gamer types reported communicating concerns about products and services to publishers (H5) and other gamers (H6). Therefore, the Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test was used to detect the predicted monotonic trends. The omnibus test for the item “How often have you personally communicated a concern about a video game product or service to a video game publisher?” produced a significant difference ($T_{JT} = 9,841.00$, $z = 5.60$, $p < .001$). Planned pairwise comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between all three groups in the predicted monotonic direction. The frequencies of communication revealed that hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 136.24) were significantly more likely than casual gamers (*mean rank* = 79.28)

and average gamers (*mean rank* = 110.92) to communicate a concern to AAA video game publishers. The differences were significant at $p < .001$. Thus, H5 is supported.

In addition to communicating concerns with video game products and services to publishers, consumers may also communicate with like-minded community members, other gamers in this case, about their concerns. As described in the literature review, social media platforms facilitate discussions among consumers, especially those who identify with a particular consumer group. The Jonckheere-Terpstra test was used to test for the monotonic trend predicted by H6. The overall test for the item assessing how often participants had personally communicated a concern about a video game product or service to other gamers was statistically significant ($T_{JT} = 10,720.00, z = 7.16, p < .001$). The corrected follow-up tests revealed the predicted significant differences between the three gamer types. Hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 146.31) were significantly more likely than casual gamers (*mean rank* = 69.29) and average gamers (*mean rank* = 112.59) to communicate a concern to other gamers. The differences were significant at $p < .001$, and H6 is supported.

Both hypotheses are supported, the responses indicated that though there was a monotonic trend between the three groups for frequencies of communicating a concern. However, it is important to note that all three groups were more likely to communicate concerns to *other gamers* than to AAA publishers.

Attitudes toward Businesses

For the purposes of this dissertation, the Attitudes toward Businesses measure, an assessment of attitudes toward businesses in general, was adapted to reflect respondents' attitudes toward AAA video game publishers. RQ4 asks whether the three gamer groups differ in attitudes toward businesses. The overall test was not statistically significant for attitudes toward

video game publishers ($\chi^2 (2) = 5.34, p = .07$). For attitudes toward businesses, casual, average, and hardcore gamers held similar beliefs about AAA video game publishers.

Retaliation toward Publishers

RQ5 asks whether gamer groups differed in their reports of their intentions to complain to a publisher for problem-solving (RQ5a) and to engage in vindictive complaining/retaliatory behaviors toward the publisher (RQ5b). Because the intention to engage in negative WOM with other gamers and third-party complaining for publicity to gamers were strongly and positively related, these two scales were combined to create a composite score for complaining to other gamers (RQ5c).

For problem-solving complaining to publishers, the overall test was significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 17.60, p < .001$) (RQ5a). The adjusted comparisons indicated significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 84.16) and average gamers (*mean rank* = 110.41, $p < .05$) as well as between casual and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 130.77, $p < .001$). The difference between average and hardcore gamers was not significant. This result was expected because casual gamers probably are not as invested in gaming as the other two groups. Thus, casual gamers would be less likely to attempt to engage with publishers because they have greater monetary and psychological (identity) investments in gaming.

The overall test for vindictive complaining to publishers did not reveal differences between the groups ($\chi^2 (2) = .81, p = .67$) (RQ5b); therefore, gamer types do not differ in their intentions to engage in vindictive complaining to AAA publishers.

Finally, for complaining to other gamers (negative WOM and third-party complaining for publicity), the overall test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 25.03, p < .001$) (RQ5c). The follow-up comparisons indicated significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 77.12) and

average gamers (*mean rank* = 116.39, $p < .001$) as well as between casual and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 129.28, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference between the average and hardcore gamer groups. This result is not surprising given that average and hardcore gamers may be more likely to be immersed in a community of gamers to whom they could complain, thus making it easier to share complaints about publishers. In contrast, casual gamers may be much less likely to be involved in a gaming community that could facilitate sharing complaints.

Retaliatory Behaviors from Passive to Aggressive

Finally, to address RQ6, the nine retaliation items developed by the researcher were examined using the Kruskal-Wallis test. The items ranged from more passive retaliatory behavior to more aggressive retaliatory behavior toward the AAA publisher. The analyses for the first variable, which represents the most passive action, “refuse to buy any more products from the publisher,” revealed a statistically significant omnibus test ($\chi^2 (2) = 18.79, p < .001$). The follow-up comparisons with the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated significant differences between casual (*mean rank* = 80.85) and average gamers (*mean rank* = 117.91) as well as between casual and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 121.67). The differences were significant at $p < .001$. There was no significant difference between average and hardcore gamers. Though not significantly different between the average and hardcore gamer groups, the results for refusal to buy from the company in the future result could be expected because casual gamers may be less likely to consume as many video game products and services and may be less selective about the games they play. Thus, casual gamers may be less dependent on the publisher. In contrast, it would be more difficult for consumers whose identities are closely linked to gaming and to others within the gaming community who play a game to refrain from purchasing products if they have a high motivation to be involved with the game.

Next, the variable “start an activist campaign against the publisher” was not significantly different among the gamer groups ($\chi^2 (2) = 5.95, p = .051$).

Third, respondents reported whether they would “pirate products” as a retaliatory behavior, with the expectation that the publisher would lose money as a form of retaliatory behavior. The overall test indicated the groups’ responses did not differ ($\chi^2 (2) = 3.69, p = .16$).

The overall test for the item “Create a modification that changes the video game” was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 4.75, p = .09$).

The variable “Disrupt playing service through digital hacking” also failed to demonstrate statistical significance ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.87, p = .24$).

The respondents reported whether they would “disrupt playing service through digital hacking” as a form of retaliatory behavior. The overall test was not significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.87, p = .24$).

The overall test for the item “Troll and harass other players in a game to disrupt service” was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 4.87, p = .09$).

The item “Troll and harass the publisher and its representatives through social media” was not significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 3.88, p = .14$).

The variable “Reveal private information about the publisher and its representatives” was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (2) = 8.79, p < .05$). The follow-up tests with the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons revealed a significant difference between hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 96.06) and casual gamers (*mean rank* = 118.97, $p < .05$). However, average gamers did not differ significantly from either hardcore or casual gamers. An examination of patterns of responses for this variable revealed significant outliers among all three groups, which were likely to affect the results. Thus, the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Finally, the overall test for the item “Make a fake emergency call about the publishers and its representatives” was statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 9.12, p < .05$). The follow-up comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that casual gamers (*mean rank* = 119.29) differed from average (*mean rank* = 103.11) and hardcore gamers (*mean rank* = 97.88). These differences were significant at $p < .05$; however, average gamers did not differ from hardcore gamers. As with several other items, significant outliers with all three groups were likely to distort the outcomes. This means the results are unlikely to be valid.

Among all nine variables, “Refuse to buy products” was the only retaliatory behavior that respondents consistently acknowledged they would enact. Results for all other behaviors were mixed, and the data distributions were suspect. However, it seems that groups were less likely to enact the retaliatory behaviors as the behaviors became more aggressive.

Discussion

Study One examined how different types of gamers (casual, average, and hardcore) viewed qualities of engagement. The demarcation of types of gamers were based on their own self-reported membership in three groups of gamers. This enabled participants to declare their own identifications rather than having the researcher judge and categorize their behaviors as gamers. Analyses examined their reports of the perceived importance of four qualities of engagement communication (authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) with AAA publishers. Their perceptions of “ideal engagement” from AAA publishers also were considered. Their consumer behaviors also were examined, including reports of interactions (real and imagined) with AAA publishers as well as other gamers. The research questions and hypotheses explored how these three consumer groups differ across various engagement

behaviors, including purchase behaviors as well as communication behaviors with both AAA publishers and other gamers.

Answers to the hypotheses and research questions revealed somewhat mixed results for some variables of interest. However, more consistent patterns emerged for other variables, especially those related to expected consumer-to-consumer behaviors of hardcore vs. casual gamers.

For H1a-g, each trend test indicated that casual gamers were significantly different from average and hardcore gamers; however, H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1g showed that all three groups differed significantly from each other. The tests for both H2 and H3 indicated that financial investment is associated with gamers' self-reported identities, and H4 is only partially supported with a significant difference between only hardcore gamers and casual gamers.

The results for both the general engagement concepts (authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) (RQ1) and the more specific operationalizations of the engagement concepts (RQ2) indicated that average and hardcore gamers place more importance on these engagement concepts and reported that AAA publishers were meeting their needs for authentic interaction and transparent communication operationalizations; however, group evaluations for the extended operationalizations of legitimacy and responsiveness were similar.

With the exception of CLV, for which hardcore gamers did not differ significantly from average gamers, the patterns of mean ranks demonstrated that hardcore gamers were most likely to report participating in these forms of engagement, while casual gamers were least likely to report performing the behaviors.

Both H5 and H6 are supported through the identification of a monotonic trend across the three gamer types. However, it is important to note that all three groups reported they are more

likely to communicate concerns to other gamers than to communicate concerns to AAA publishers. This is a significant finding that highlights the value that gamers attach to interaction with other gamers. Moreover, it raises interesting questions about why these consumers turn to other consumers rather than the AAA publishers.

Casual, average, and hardcore gamers held similar attitudes toward AAA publishers (RQ4). Results for the instrument assessing beliefs and attitudes toward publishers support the idea that hardcore gamers, compared to other consumer types, are not aberrant or over-demanding or likely to have overly negative perceptions of and unrealistic expectations for AAA publishers. Though portrayals of hardcore gamers may frame them as unreasonable, the results report here suggest that this may be an unfair stereotype.

For retaliation, casual gamers may not be invested enough in gaming to engage with a publisher to solve a problem, whereas average and hardcore gamers may be willing to attempt engagement due to a larger investment in gaming (RQ5a). For RQ5b, gamer type was not associated with the type of vindictive complaining that AAA publishers might experience from gamers. Finally, average and hardcore gamers may be more likely than casual gamers to be immersed in a community of gamers to whom they can complain, thus making it easier to share complaints about publishers compared to casual gamers (RQ5c). Additionally, the salience of the gamer identity might help explain their reliance on other gamers whom they perceive to be in-group members

Finally, willingness to engage in nine retaliatory behaviors was assessed for RQ6. The behaviors varied in intensity as well as legality. The behaviors “refuse to buy products” was the only retaliatory behavior that respondents consistently acknowledged they would implement. For this variable, significant differences were found between casual and average gamers as well

as between casual and hardcore gamers. It is important to note that refusing to buy products was likely seen as the most socially acceptable retaliatory response. It was the most “passive” retaliatory response. It does not require the gamer to *do* something; rather it only requires that the gamer refrain from doing something. Other methods of retaliation, such as SWATing and digital hacking, are illegal activities, and other form of retaliation such as revealing private information the publisher and starting an activist campaign would require a good deal of time and effort. Thus, it is not surprising that refusing to purchase products from the AAA publisher would be the most frequently reported retaliation behavior. However, the analyses for the various retaliatory behaviors was problematic due to a number of extreme outliers in responses, and thus results must be interpreted with caution.

Overall, the data for this study indicates that gamer type, a self-reported identity, does play a role in how respondents engage with and perceive the video game industry. The results showed that identity plays a role in engagement, reaffirming previous engagement literature that examined how identity and brand love translates into engagement and value (e.g., Wallace et al., 2014) .

Furthermore, previous engagement research was reaffirmed for gamers’ interest in engaging with fellow gamers versus engaging with AAA publishers to express their concerns about video game products and services (e.g., Smith & Taylor, 2017). Results revealed that all three groups preferred communicating and engaging with each other rather than with AAA publishers. However, the results still lack the contextual nuance required to thoroughly understand how video game consumers responded to AAA publishers’ engagement practices and implement their own engagement with publishers as well as other gamers.

Studies Two and Three are designed to complement the findings of Study One by examining the contents of promotional materials and journalist critiques of three poorly-received video games as well as the contents of consumer-to-consumer conversations about publisher engagement practices and consumer-to-consumer engagement practices. Although the pending research is unable to determine if the conversations involve casual, average, or hardcore gamers, Study Three contributes insights into naturally-occurring consumer-to-consumer engagement. The results of Study One suggest that the individuals engaging on Reddit to discuss these issues are likely to be average and hardcore gamers rather than casual gamers.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study. The most significant limitations pertain to the participants and recruitment methods. The survey was completed by a volunteer, convenience sample of gamers that is not representative of the gamer populations. Though participants may self-identify as casual, average, or hardcore gamers, their perceptions and behaviors cannot be generalized to all gamers, or even to those who self-identify as casual, average, or hardcore gamers. Additionally, these labels may be limiting and thus fail to represent the variance and diversity of the video game culture. Though tenets of social identity provided a theoretical rationale for the self-categorizations of gamers, the use of the terms “casual,” “average,” and “hardcore” gamer categories may not have resonated with participants’ experiences. Moreover, it is possible that participants may report different identities depending upon contextual or situational factors such as the type of games being played. For instance, a person might consider herself a casual gamer when thinking about playing a specific MMO game but categorize herself as a hardcore game for puzzle games. Similarly, a person’s play behavior (and thus self-identity)

may vacillate according to personal variations in “free time,” availability of playing companions, or “finishing” a game.

Another limitation is related to the nature of the data collected. Assumptions concerning normal distribution of data and homogeneity of variances within and between groups often were violated. For example, the data could be skewed due to outliers in the groups, particularly participants who rated themselves with a score of “0” on the gamer type sliding scale. The choice to include these outliers were made to acknowledge a respondent’s self-identity and to recognize that though individuals may buy video games, they may not consider themselves gamers. Though more conservative, non-parametric statistics were used for the data analysis, non-parametric statistics are not immune to assumptions about the distribution of data. Future research should try to identify and study a representative sample of gamers because the responses obtained through a representative sample of gamers would inspire greater confidence in the results and suggestions for engagement practices.

Demographic factors of gender and age were not considered in Study One. Several studies have examined the harassment of female gamers (N. T. Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009; Tomkinson & Harper, 2015) as well as negative descriptions of female gamers as “fake gamer girls” or “not real gamers” (N. T. Taylor, 2009; Zolides, 2015). Though the differential experiences of gamers based on gender and age are important, this study adopted a more general approach to understanding how gamer types may differ in perceptions of and behaviors pertaining to their own and AAA publisher engagement practices. Future research should explore the impact of various demographics on self-reporting gamer types as well as how gender and age may be related to engagement practices.

The third limitation is that the results failed to capture gamers and consumers who may be eSports spectators. In the past few years, eSports have emerged as an increasingly attractive alternative to other spectator sports, particularly among younger viewers (T. L. Taylor, 2012). Corporate and private sponsorship is the largest revenue in eSports, providing much more revenue than is raised by the media, advertising, merchandise, and ticketing ("Esports set for £1bn revenue and 600 million audiences by 2020," 2017). The video game industry as a whole has begun to invest more resources in eSports, creating more online multiplayer gamers and creating leagues to sponsor professional players.

Let's Plays and eSports could dramatically change the gamer consumer landscape because gamers might spend more of their resources watching others play games than playing them. Gamers might also possibly spend most of their disposable income supporting their favorite streamers and professional players. Nevertheless, they may still identify as gamers. Previous research has examined the motivations and gratifications of these eSports and Let's Play communities (Blight, 2016). As eSports grows in popularity, it will be necessary for future research to examine if and how gamer self-identities transfer to the eSports environment and what engagement might look like with the context of eSports.

Lastly, another limitation is the length of the survey. With a total of 70 questions that were both qualitative and quantitative, many potential participants were dissuaded from participating and often stopped answering questions in the middle of the survey. While some participants praised the depth of the questions, data was lost or not collected due to participant fatigue.

Conclusion

Study One indicates that gamers are more likely to enact engagement with their fellow consumers than with publishers in the video game industry. Studies Two and Three further investigate questions concerning engagement by examining the textual evidence and the content of these conversations about engagement practices. Moreover, investigating gaming events that provoked a negative reaction from video game consumers and journalists complement Study One, providing a different angle on the nature of engagement with the video game industry and between consumer.

CHAPTER III

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AAA INDUSTRY PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL AND CONSUMER CRITIQUES INTERPRETED IN VIDEO GAME TRADE PUBLICATIONS

Overview

Though researchers and practitioners surmise that engagement is important because it enhances the quality of organization-consumer relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men & Tsai, 2014), there is a need for more research on what these engagement practices look like in action (for exceptions, see Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Smith & Taylor, 2017; Vorvoreanu, 2009). The purpose of Study Two is to explore two types of engagement relationships and how they are implemented: business-to-consumer (B2C) engagement and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement. A qualitative analysis was used to examine textual evidence of engagement by AAA video game publishers and consumers as interpreted through the promotional material of AAA video game publishers (businesses-to-consumer engagement) and professional video game trade publications (consumer-to-consumer engagement).

The chapter is organized as follows: (1) a brief review of literature previously established in Chapter I that is related to Study Two, and the identification of research questions guiding Study Two; (2) the context for Study Two, in particular the background information for the companies and games that are part of the case; (3) the methodology for Study Two, including the collection of data and how it was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software; (4) the results including examples of important themes and texts gleaned from analysis; and (5) a brief discussion including limitations and directions for future research.

Video Game Culture and the Industry

Today, the global video game industry includes video games on PCs and game consoles that can connect to TVs and have portable hardware. Today's consumer has access to multiple devices, whether mobile or tablets and more, to play video games (Hall, 2011). Research on gamer culture has proliferated as the video game industry has grown and as gaming develops increasing importance as a mainstay of contemporary culture (Bissell, 2011; Bogost, 2011; Donovan, 2010).

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue that video games are “A media that once seemed all fun [that] is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital” (p. xi). However, this line of thinking assumes that the industry is in total control, whereas other schools differ. Consalvo's (2009a) gaming capital, “the dynamism of gameplay as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry” (p. 4) through the application of intellectual skills to the video game medium, is a form of currency for the video game industry and gamers that can be cashed in for perceived benefits. Gaming capital is “highly flexible, able to adapt to different types of gameplay, various games, and changing notions of what's important to know about games” (p. 184).

The video game industry has tried to commodify gaming capital, with varying degrees of success. In controlling the information, the industry was able to target the customer segment directly and to control the population the industry wanted to sell to. However, with gaming culture's quick adoption of technology like the Internet, fans started to create their websites, forums, and communities in order to trade information and gaming capital, outside the control of the industry (I. O. Taylor, 2015).

Understanding game culture and subsequently the agency a person has when playing a video game is essential to understanding the industry's development. Understanding previous, well-publicized incidents of gamers exercising influence in areas of the video game industry may fuel gamers' expectations and confidence about meaningful engagement with publishers.

The gamer culture itself has often demonstrated that at times game players are motivated to mobilize and connect with other gamers in order to discuss concerns they have about the industry, discussions that can prompt the culture to influence how the industry operates and engages (Tassi, 2014). Academic accounts often try to present the gamer's side of the story, without looking at the "secondhand reports" that describe gamers (Shaw, 2010). Likewise, journalists and outside interest groups tend to "otherize" gamers as a distinct culture, separate from the constructed mainstream (Shaw, 2010). Therefore, when exploring how video game consumers engage with publishers and other consumers, the research must look at how engagement is perceived from different perspectives.

Engagement Theory

Engagement is a socially responsive approach to organizational communication, where the outcomes of the organization align with the wants and needs of society (Men & Tsai, 2013). Organizations may pursue various forms of engagement with stakeholders. They may use engagement to encourage the development of social capital among their stakeholders through authentic discussion and dialogue. Engagement is an essential concept in public relations as organizations seek to cultivate positive relationships with stakeholders for many strategic, instrumental purposes. Marketing research also notes the value of engagement in developing consumer relationships (Sashi, 2012).

Scholars and professionals in public relations view engagement as the ultimate marker of an excellent organization-public relationship (OPR) (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). Scholars have tried to connect online interactive engagement to positive outcomes like increased donations to non-profits as well as positive relationships in general. Kent and Taylor (2002) viewed engagement as a dimension of dialogue, a mutually-oriented state of mind where interactants are "willing to give their whole selves" (p. 26) to communication encounters among dialogic partners.

The video game industry is not unique in that it chooses to engage but are perceived as more unique in actively reciprocating that engagement, while also communicating their expectations to the industry. The quantity of this communication provides an access point for data collection that can provide insight into video game consumer motivations for trying to influence an organization. However, though consumers of video games may be interested in engaging and being engaged, their views of what engagement looks like may differ from current academic conceptualizations of engagement.

Because engagement may be especially likely in situations where consumers have adverse reactions to products and services as well as to the organization's promotional efforts that prompted purchases, it is important to identify cases where AAA publishers experienced backlash from consumers regarding a game that was promoted extensively by a company and was regarded by consumers as a potentially excellent video game. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed for Study Two:

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are publisher reactions to consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

The researcher selected three, well-publicized cases that exemplify the characteristics of perceived betrayals by the AAA publisher. The case studies focus on the promotion, release, and reaction to three AAA video games: Electronic Arts' *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) and Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2016), a game in which Sony Interactive Entertainment had invested. Other than the fact that all three games were expected to be commercially successful and take place in a galaxy separate from our own, the most crucial commonality for the purposes of this study is that consumers heavily criticized these three games for not fulfilling their expectations for the video game product and/or not fulfilling the expectations AAA publishers had generated for consumers. Specifically, the criticism focused on technical and quality issues for the released game, lack of features initially promoted by the company, and unwanted features forcefully added into the game.

It is necessary to provide background details for both Electronic Arts and Sony, the publishers behind the video games as well as the development and promotional history of the three video games to understand the relevance of the cases selected for Study Two.

Context

Electronic Arts

Founded in 1982, Electronic Arts is the second largest video game developer in the Americas and Europe based on revenue, after Activision Blizzard, which became the largest after Activision and Blizzard combined their company assets. Electronic Arts has extensive

intellectual property, including PC, console, and mobile games. Even the most casual video game player may recognize the Electronic Arts logo and hear its memorable slogan, “Challenge Everything” when a game first starts.

Despite being one of the largest and most profitable companies in the video game industry, Electronic Arts also has a reputation of being the most reviled by gamers. In 2012 and 2013, Electronic Arts beat out corporations, such as Bank of America and Comcast, to be voted as the “Worst Company in America” (Morran, 2013). At the time, Electronic Arts would be the first company to win the award twice.¹

The main reason consumers despised the company was for its business practices, which were deemed unethical. Most notable was the company’s release of the popular city simulation game *SimCity 5* (2013). Electronic Arts required users to have an internet connection to play the game through the company’s servers, arguing that it was an innovation in distributing and playing games. Instead, others saw it as an anti-piracy gaming method and a heavy-handed attempt by the company to control how gamers played the game through Internet servers, rather than letting users directly “own” the game on their personal computers. Worse yet for Electronic Arts, its new, innovative way of gaming it created overloaded servers, leading to multiple network outages that had products lagging, crashing, and losing game data. Though Electronic Arts temporarily stopped marketing the game to focus on fixing technical issues, it refused to offer refunds to users who had already purchased the USD 60 game (Sarker, 2013). Further prompted as to why an offline version of the game was not or could not be created, the company argued that game was designed as an online platform and would be challenging to recreate as an

¹ Comcast would win the award a second time in 2014. It was also the last year the “Worst Company in America” poll took place.

offline version (Tassi, 2014). However, this statement was determined to be a lie when a coder discovered that the deletion of one line of code stopped a “forced disconnect function” if the game was offline for more than twenty minutes, allowing the game to be played offline indefinitely (Good, 2013).

There are some legitimate trust issues between Electronic Arts and consumers; however, Electronic Arts is still one of the biggest producers of games, many of which are beloved and praised by its consumers. In particular, the *Mass Effect* and *Star Wars Battlefront* franchises are heralded by fans as producing engaging stories and innovative, fun gameplay. However, these high expectations for engaging stories and gameplay are also the reason why the sequel games in these franchises encountered backlash and are appropriate to the subject of study for this dissertation.

Mass Effect: Andromeda. Part of the highly praised role-playing *Mass Effect* game franchise, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) was a spin-off focusing on a different group of spacefarers venturing into the Andromeda galaxy to find a new home to sustain life. The player assumes the role of either Scott or Sara Ryder, a young military recruit, and the son or daughter of Alec Ryder who is humanity’s Pathfinder, an elected leader who guides humanity on a one-way 600-year trip to Andromeda. Events transpire that result in the player’s Ryder becoming humanity’s next Pathfinder, and this character is tasked with finding a new homeworld for humanity, confronting a hostile alien race, the Kett, and learning the secrets of a mysterious synthetic (part biological lifeform, part machine) race called the Remnant. Like previous *Mass Effect* games, players could customize Ryder’s appearance, including face and eye shape and skin tone. Choices in dialogue and actions also affected the outcomes of gameplay, giving the player a personalized gaming experience.

The game was highly anticipated, especially since the last game, *Mass Effect 3* (2012), was met with controversy because of its ending, which led to the Retake Mass Effect revolt. As previously mentioned in Chapter I, the Retake Mass Effect Revolt is the event where gamers challenged Electronic Arts to “change the ending” of the game to one they thought would be more suitable to the franchise, specifically an ending where the protagonist survives (Tassi, 2014). While BioWare, the developer of the game and subsidiary of Electronic Arts, had achieved financial success with its previously launched AAA game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), the company endured substantial pressure to create a game that rivaled or preferably excelled previous BioWare games. Unfortunately, development for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* was troubled from the start, “marred by a director change, multiple major re-scopes, an understaffed animation team, technological challenges, communication issues, office politics, a compressed timeline, and brutal crunch” (Schreier, 2017b).

Moreover, Electronic Arts required BioWare to use a specific video game engine to help develop the game: Frostbite. According to Schreier (2017a), a video game engine constitutes a collection of software that reuses and recycles material from previous games to help with development. It typically has a set of standard features, like a physics generator or saves system, making it easier for video game developers to transfer their skills to different games using the same engine. In the video game industry, Frostbite is known as one of the most potent engines but also one of the hardest to use (Schreier, 2017b). Moreover, many of the features BioWare wanted for its games, like managing party members or keeping track of a player’s inventory, were not included in the primary engine. Therefore, much of the coding was developed from scratch.

Mired by lack of resources and time, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* the game was released on March 21, 2017, in hopes to recoup at least some of the costs. Having to pay the full price of \$59.99 for a game that was not finished, consumers were infuriated to find that the game suffered significant technical errors, including facial animations (or lack thereof), lagging, and the screen turning lime green for a few minutes (Garst, 2017). Consumers who were angry about these graphical glitches went so far as to harass an employee of BioWare who served as a lead designer of the game, accusing her of ruining the game (Gach, 2017a) even though these types of games require hundreds of developers overseen by several leads. It is important to note that many consumers who were unhappy with *Mass Effect: Andromeda* condemned this retaliatory behavior (Gach, 2017a). While patches for the game were created to fix the glitches, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* was considered a bad investment, and BioWare ultimately decided not to make any more downloadable content, otherwise known as DLCs, for the game (which is often expected for AAA games) and focused on its next future game *Anthem* (Good, 2017). The decision to not create further DLCs left other consumers angry because they felt their money had been wasted and they had been abandoned by the company (Good, 2017).

Star Wars Battlefront II. *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) is the sequel to the favorite *Star Wars Battlefront* (2015), a reboot produced by Electronic Arts of the 2004 *Battlefront* series (initially produced by Pandemic Studios). The single-player campaign mode is an original Star Wars story that takes place thirty years before the events of the movie *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). However, the appeal of the game is in its multiplayer battle arena where players can pick from a roster of recognizable Star Wars characters. Through online gaming and pairing, gamers can battle their Star Wars characters against other players from across the world.

Star Wars Battlefront II was expected to surpass its predecessor. Its graphics, story, and gameplay were considered exceptional in early beta-testing of the game, made available to select consumers, though it was eventually available to all for a discounted price (Chalk, 2017b). However, before the game was released on November 17, 2017, one feature, in particular, left many gamers disgruntled: the inclusion of loot boxes and microtransactions.

A loot box is a consumable virtual item that can be redeemed to receive a randomized selection of further virtual items whereas microtransactions enable users to purchase virtual goods via micropayments (e.g., 99 cents). Both loot boxes and microtransactions are common in free-to-play or freemium games where it is free for users to play, but loot boxes and purchases enable progression through levels of the game by paying for bonuses or lifelines while generating revenue for the company. Microtransactions are routinely lambasted in the gaming community as a subtle way for companies to prey on gamers who lack the patience to progress and have the money to spend. Some researchers argue that it is akin to the pleasure one can receive from gambling (Drummond & Sauer, 2018), with the “jackpot” being better than all of your friends and competitors, rather than a large sum of cash. In a game, which already costs \$59.99 to purchase, the mere act of including microtransactions has often considered an insult to the consumer (Pearce, 2017; Yin-Poole, 2016a).

In the case of *Star Wars Battlefront II*, the loot boxes and microtransactions related to characters in the game. With the purchase of the game, consumers only had a certain number of characters available from which to choose, and through hours of playing, or a quick and easy payment, other characters could be earned (or bought). However, because excluded characters principal to the Star Wars franchise, including Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, were not included in the base game (meaning they were not available at the start), consumers argued that

these characters should have already been included with the game. The publisher's use of microtransactions and loot boxes led to many potential consumers boycotting the game and even government action. The Belgian government announced that it was investigating the game, determining whether loot boxes constituted unlicensed gambling, arguing that if the investigators could prove loot boxes violated gambling laws, the government would work on banning loot boxes in any future video games sold, not only in Belgium, but the entire European Union (Bailey, 2017). Singapore, Australia, and the State of Hawaii also investigated whether or not loot boxes were considered gambling (Hio, 2017; "Video games could fall afoul of anti-gambling laws," 2017). Fortunately, for Electronic Arts, it was determined that loot boxes, as seen in *Star Wars Battlefront II*, should not be considered a form of gambling, though the investigators did not explain why they came to that decision. Regardless, the government response influenced publishers' use of loot boxes and microtransactions. Electronic Arts temporarily removed the microtransactions and stated that future use of microtransactions would be used purely for cosmetic enhancements (Makuch, 2017).

Sony Interactive Entertainment

While Sony Interactive Entertainment (SIE) is not as prominent as its competitor Electronic Arts, it does wield significant influence in the video game industry. SIE was founded in 1993 as a subsidiary of the Sony Corporation. The subsidiary was created specifically to help Sony enter the video game industry by creating its video game console unit to rival competitor Nintendo. In 1994, the Sony PlayStation was released and still exists today in its fourth iteration.

Around 2005, the SIE Worldwide Studio was created to begin publishing video game software under the SIE label primarily for its PlayStation console but also for PCs. In 2006, Sony

released the PlayStation network, a digital distribution service to make it easier for users to digitally download new games as an option to purchasing a disc copy. While many gamers enjoyed the ease of downloading the games, the PlayStation Network has been the source of very troublesome privacy issues and a lack of transparency in reporting these issues.

In 2011, the PlayStation Network was abruptly shut down with no word from Sony about why the outage occurred. A week after the unexpected outage occurred, Sony revealed that the PlayStation Network had been hacked, revealing the privacy data, including credit card numbers, of 77 million PlayStation Network subscribers (Quinn & Arthur, 2011). At the time it was the largest security breach of its kind and cost Sony millions in sales, security revamps, and class action lawsuits from identity theft victims (T. Phillips, 2016). Unfortunately, it was not the first time the PlayStation Network was hacked as the activist group Anonymous had launched distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks early in 2011 to protest privacy concerns the group had with the network (T. Phillips, 2016). Unfortunately, for Sony, the privacy hack helped to prove Anonymous' claims, furthering more distrust from its consumers. A similar DDoS would happen again in 2014 when the hacker group Lizard Squad disrupted service on Christmas Day to prove how easy it was to stop service for PlayStation network as well as its competitor Xbox Live (McCormack & Spillet, 2014). While no private information was revealed, it still left many consumers concerned if Sony took their privacy concerns seriously (T. Phillips, 2016).

Despite these privacy issues, there is one thing gamers like about SIE: its commitment to helping independent video game developers. While big-name publishers like Electronic Arts, Sony, and Activision Blizzard dominate the industry concerning sales, 53% of video game developers identify themselves as an independent (Groen, 2013) and may not have earned enough funds to make back their investment in the game. While bigger name companies have

helped to invest in smaller, indie games, it is Sony that has come out on top as the “indie darling.” Part of its reputation stems from letting its indie developers have relatively free reign with creative decisions that other companies do not provide (Groen, 2013). Moreover, Sony actively seeks indie developers rather than waiting for developers to come to the company and tries to make the process as easy as possible to entice future investments away from competitors like Microsoft or Electronic Arts. Sony even offers an angel investor fund called “Pub Fund” that promises indie games cash for development without “selling out” to a major publisher (Harding, 2016). Hello Games, the developer behind the game *No Man’s Sky* (2016) was one of the indie darlings in which Sony invested its money.

No Man’s Sky. Hello Games’ *No Man’s Sky* was produced and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment and advertised to be a groundbreaking new game. In the game, players perform tasks and missions within a procedurally generated deterministic open universe, which includes over 18 quintillion planets. Through the game’s procedural generation system, planets have ecosystems with unique forms of flora and fauna, and various sentient alien species may engage the player in combat or trade within planetary systems. Ultimately, players attempt to make it to Atlas, an entity at the center of the universe.

Announced in 2014 during Sony’s Media Event at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), *No Man’s Sky* was the first independently developed game demonstrated during these center-stage events (Khatchadourian, 2015). After the event, Sean Murray, *No Man’s Sky* Lead Director who was the main presenter for *No Man’s Sky* at E3, put himself at the center of the hype and promotion surrounding *No Man’s Sky* by agreeing to multiple interviews and conference presentations. His face and presence became synonymous with the game, and he was quick to answer any questions media influences and consumers had about the innovative

functions of the game. The elements that Sean Murray discussed were large-scale multiplayer battles in the galaxy, points of interest that gamers could have the honor of "discovering," interaction with other players and the ability to form alliances and the destruction and reconstruction of integral space stations and fleets. While one or two of these elements have been featured in games before, it seemed like *No Man's Sky* had no limit in features. It was a hybrid of an open-world RPG and a virtual sandbox: a true game for creatives and explorers.

With the hype surrounding the game, including comments by developers in interviews with mainstream media outlets, when the game launched on August 9, 2016, consumers were bitterly disappointed. Many of the elements promised in the video game were unavailable at launch (Hillier, 2016), and the mysterious Atlas at the center of the universe is never seen. Accusations of deception for *No Man's Sky* even led to an investigation by the U.K.-based Advertising Standards Authority to determine if Hello Games engaged in false advertising, though the company was cleared of all charges (Crecente, 2016). *No Man's Sky* has now been regarded as an example of how "not to" advertise for a video game. However, since its launch, Hello Games has been committed to improving the game for continuing customers. With recent significant updates and introduction of many of the promised features, including improved crafting and farming capabilities (an extensive part of the game), improved story, and improved graphics, the game is currently being touted as innovative and enjoying a comeback (S. Chandler, 2017). As recently as July 2018, *No Man's Sky* was releasing updates for the game, prompting consumers who swore that they would never pick up the game to give it a second chance. Likewise, the highly anticipated multiplayer mode consumers expected is in its first release was finally patched into the game (Hussain, 2018).

The background information for Electronic Arts and Sony, as well as the specific descriptions of the three games, provide a foundation for Studies Two (Chapter III) and Three (Chapter IV). For both studies, background information on the publishers and the games is essential to understanding public reactions to these games.

Using text from promotional material and critiques by consumers interpreted by video game trade publications, Study Two analyzes authentic examples of engagement by companies and consumers as narrated in video game trade publications. Because engagement may be especially likely in situations where consumers have voiced negative reactions to products and services, it was necessary to explore cases where AAA publishers experienced backlash for video games that were criticized by consumers for not fulfilling expectations they had for the video game product or fulfilling the expectations purported by the AAA publishers to consumers.

The preceding discussion of the controversies surrounding these games includes concerns of how a game was advertised or promoted, the technical features of a game including unfinished graphics, in-game glitches, and attempts by the company to get consumers to pay extra for different features of a game. The examination of specific materials and documents related to consumer engagement can help with the understanding of the complex issues surrounding the creation of expectations and the reaction when these expectations are not met. The examination is conducted by identifying themes in publisher-initiated engagement materials (RQ1), consumer-initiated engagement as described by journalists (RQ2), and publisher reactions to consumer-initiated engagement as described by journalists (RQ3).

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are publisher reactions to consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

Method

Procedures: Selection of Materials

Study Two analyzes the text of online documents about the three aforementioned games: *No Man's Sky* (2016), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). The purpose is to compare and contrast thematic insights related to engagement, specifically how companies engaged with consumers, and how consumers reciprocated as revealed through journalist accounts of customer engagement efforts

Two types of documents were analyzed for Study Two: promotional material and critiques. Promotional materials are the press releases taken from the video games' official websites about the video games themselves. Found under the News Sections for each website, the range of the promotional material starts when the first press release for the game is posted, up until the game is finally released. The rationale for choosing promotional material from the company websites was that it would be the most direct communication from a company on how the company wanted consumers to view its upcoming product.

Moreover, the purpose of the promotional material is to engage consumers, making it ideal for this study. By featuring it on the official video game website, the company had the most control over its message, which is crafted individually to engage with consumers. While consumers may interpret the messages in different ways and state their own opinions about the messages, the information provided by the company is still the same. Most of the documents

between the data range for each game were collected; however, some documents from the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* website were not used for analysis because they focused on character descriptions and statistics and did not seem to provide anything further concerning consumer engagement. A total of 58 promotional material documents were analyzed (*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, $n=11$; *Star Wars Battlefront II*, $n=8$; *No Man's Sky*, $n=39$). The results for promotional material explore how businesses engage and communicate with consumers (B2C).

The second type of document analyzed were critiques from professional video game trade journalists. Professional video game trade journalists are defined as paid journalists who write about the video game industry and gaming culture. While there are trade journals dedicated to video games from *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, and *IGN*, video game trade journalists have also found a home in other professional business trade journals like *Forbes*. Often, video game journalists provide reviews of products being released, offering a summary and a rating score. However, for this analysis, the researcher did not use this type of article but drew upon articles that reported and synthesized the comments of consumer backlash and company responses. The rationale for choosing professional articles to analyze consumer critiques is to help provide a synthesized narrative from reputable sources. Professional writers are paid and must go through an editing process before publication whereas video game blogs use the opinions of one or a few individuals. While video game blogs may provide quality journalism over topics, for this dissertation the researcher wanted to focus on sources with an organizational code of ethics for the journalists and that have a higher expectation regarding quality and credibility, going through a prescribed editorial review chosen by the organization.

Procedures: Retrieving the Materials

Using the Google News search function, the researcher entered the title of the game, the name of the company, and the keywords, "launch," "release," and "criticism." A date filter was applied to limit articles between 2016-2017. However, in the case of Electronic Arts, articles from 2012 were also used to showcase a distrust of the company as previously discussed. The decision to include two pre-2016 articles was because consumer distrust of the company was mentioned numerous times in articles referring to the release of the games. Articles were assessed on the amount of information as well as uniqueness with the content presented to ensure the best quality and quantity of information; therefore, information would not be repeated. A total of 21 critique documents were analyzed (Electronic Arts, $n=2$, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, $n=6$; *Star Wars Battlefront II*, $n=3$; *No Man's Sky*, $n=10$). The results for critiques primarily explore how consumers engage with businesses (C2B) though there are some elements of consumer-to-consumer engagement (C2C). The critiques help with this analysis by providing a narrative to help tell the story of consumer complaints as well as how video game trade journalists illustrate how consumers and businesses are perceived in the conflict.

NVivo Analysis

The text documents extracted from online were imported into the qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) NVivo. NVivo is a data management system that helps researchers organize and code large quantities of unstructured data in a more time-efficient manner (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). In NVivo, data items are labeled as "cases" and are coded using "nodes," (Dennis & Bower, 2008) as a way to create categorical distinctions or themes within the documents (Krippendorff, 2004). The emphasis of the NVivo program is on "assistance" rather than "answering," meaning that it does not provide any answers to the research questions but

assists the researcher in finding those answers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) thereby not “[supplanting] time-honoured ways of learning from data” (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 2). The most important part about using NVivo or any QDAS is to capture “what is most important, most prevalent, [and] most essential in the thousands of words dealing with the object of investigation” (Thompson, 2002, p. 16).

Most of the technological assistance is done by using queries. Queries ask questions of the data, and the program retrieves from the database all information relevant to determine an answer to those questions. These queries can be based on word frequency, identifying a specific word or phrase, and comparison of documents, codes, and other files. Results of queries are saved to allow further interrogation, which makes it much easier for researchers to experiment with new research directions (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Table 1 provides a detailed description of the name of the NVivo function, its purpose, and its application in the dissertation. As NVivo is the primary data management tool for Studies Two and Three, the table will be referenced again later in Chapter IV.

Table 1 NVivo Functions - Adapted from Houghton et al. (2017)

| <u>NVivo Functions</u> | <u>Purpose</u> | <u>Application in Dissertation</u> |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Cases | Cases are units of analysis and observation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). | Each item of text for analysis was imported as a case and organized by study, company, game, and document type (e.g., Study Two -> Sony -> No Man's Sky -> No Man's Sky Critiques). |
| Nodes | Nodes create categorical distinctions or themes within the documents (Dennis & Bower, 2008; Krippendorf, 2004). | Nodes in the study were the leading collection of emergent themes from the study. The nodes helped to organize themes and can be combined if the researcher determines it necessary. |
| Queries | Queries ask questions of the qualitative data, and the program retrieves from the database all information relevant to determining an answer to those questions. Results of queries are saved to allow further interrogation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). | A word frequency query was conducted to determine emergent themes, assessing the context around the word through the word tree function. The context itself would be the deciding factor for the code. The minimum word length was five but also included stemmed words to ensure a higher quality collection of themes. |
| Matrices | Matrices can cross-tabulate related information in the database through the use of queries (Casey et al., 2016). | A crosstab query was used in Study Two to help inform the organization of results. In particular, it helped to determine what were the most common nodes in each case. |

The choice to use NVivo for qualitative analysis was to help control and curate the vast amounts of data. Moreover, the software's coding tools and functions make it easy for the research to ascertain critical insights from data by searching for key phrases or words, evaluating the context behind these phrases or words to make sure they were appropriate toward analyses, coding those phrases, and re-coding if necessary. Being able to re-code is especially useful if a mistake is

noticed, saving the researcher hours of time correcting this mistake and re-organizing the data. While NVivo can be used to help conduct multiple methods of analysis, it is most popular for constant comparison analysis. Constant comparison analysis is a commonly used qualitative technique created by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that allows words and phrases to be grouped and then compared with one another to determine connections, correlations, and other forms of inquiry (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Glaser and Strauss describe the process as:

1. Identifying a phenomenon, object, event or setting of interest.
2. Identifying a few local concepts, principles, structural or process features of the experience or phenomenon of interest.
3. Making decisions regarding the initial collection of data based on the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon.
4. Engaging in theoretical sampling
5. Providing a rationale for selecting comparison groups is the theoretical relevance for fostering the development of new categories. (p. 28-52)

When the documents were imported into NVivo, each response was automatically separated by the specific document; therefore, it was easy to distinguish when one document ended in its content, and another document's content started. Each set of responses for a question was also automatically filed to preserve the location of the data, even when items became manually grouped by the researcher to interpret the data. However, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the files or data sets are labeled correctly.

Using constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), emergent themes initially coded into nodes by using open-coding, or “[t]he process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 61). The first

part of the open-coding was conducted using the word frequency query. A word frequency query lists the most frequently occurring words in sources selected by the researcher (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). When assessing word frequency, the researcher could limit the minimum number of characters for words, to filter out short words, and has the option to have stemmed words grouped (e.g., “expect” would also include “expecting” and “expectations”). When the results of a query are retrieved, the researcher can click on the word(s) to see where they are referenced in the source and has the option to view the word by itself, in a narrow context (two or three sentences), or how it is referenced in the full text. Moreover, the word tree function helps to create a mind map surrounding the word to further evaluate the context for a particular word found through the query (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

For the word frequency query, the researcher specifically looked for words not only based on frequency but also for connection to consumer engagement interpreted by the researcher (customer, marketing, company, feedback, etc.). The minimum character word length was five but also included stemmed words to ensure a better collection of themes concerning quantity as well as quality. To best ensure the context of the word, the word tree function was implemented to make sure specific words were similar in context. For example, the word "value" might designate a monetary value or a value of the company. Using the word tree function, a researcher can see what other words surround the original word to determine its context (e.g., "the company values are" or "the value of this game"). If necessary, word tree functions can be expanded to include more words to ensure the context was correct. When the researcher approved a word and context, the items were coded and placed in its nodes, titled by the word. As more and more words were discovered, the researcher started to group similar nodes to determine overarching themes. This part of the analysis is where constant comparison analysis

played a key role because it allowed the researcher to go back and forth between words and themes to determine where they would be best defined based on the word frequency queries.

As more keywords were discovered, a text search query was also used to help determine how themes emerged in the source. Text search queries allowed the researcher to find all occurrences of a word(s) or phrase(s) in a source determined by the researcher (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). By using the keywords, the researcher was able to go back to other documents where the words were not previously identified in the word frequency to ensure a better collection of data regarding quality and quantity of information and coding. Moreover, keywords for text search queries were useful in data coding in sources not yet queried to efficiently collect data and then, a word frequency query would be conducted. This cycle would continue until all the sources of the text had gone through both a word frequency and text search query.

In total, six themes emerged for Study Two. These themes were labeled as company and products, honesty and deception, information collection, monetary, public relations and marketing, and technical. Definitions were created based around the keywords used from the word frequency and the context of how keywords were used.

Table 2 Study Two NVivo Themes

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>Description of Theme</u> | <u>Keywords Collected from Word Frequency and Used in Text Search Query</u> |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Company & Industry | Items that mention the company and the product the company has created. | Company, product, features, corporate, EA, Electronic Arts, Sony, Sean ² |
| Honesty & Deception | Items that mention perceived dishonest actions by the company | False, honesty, dishonesty, lies, unethical, truth |
| Information Collection | Items related to publishers collecting information and providing responses to feedback | Collect, information, feedback, concerns, listening, address |
| Monetary Value | Items referring to the purchase of a product, how much a game costs, and receiving refunds | Refund, money, purchase, price, arbitration, bought, buy, cost |
| Public Relations & Marketing | Items involving marketing tactics and how products are promoted | Launch, advertising, marketing, release |
| Technical Features | References to the technical features of the game | Access, issues, update, patch, development, developer, mechanics, content, animations, graphic, graphical |

After identifying the themes, the researcher conducted a crosstab query to determine how the emergent themes were referenced in each case. Specifically, the promotional materials for each game and the critiques for each game. Crosstab queries provide a quick way to check the frequency and spread of coding across cases and help to inform research results (Bazeley &

² Sean Murray is the name of the developer for *No Man's Sky* (2016) and was mentioned when discussing problems with *No Man's Sky*.

Jackson, 2013). In retrieving the results from the query, the researcher applied shading, to make it easier to see patterns in the matrix. The shading provides an extra level of accuracy in determining which themes are most common in a document or type of document because while a frequency count may be higher for one theme, a shade indicates the difference between frequencies, which may show that the difference is not significant (see Appendix D).

Results

Promotional Materials

The first set of answers addressed the first proposed research question for Study Two:

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

Based on the results of the crosstab query, the most prevalent theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) promotional material was public relations and marketing. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material, two themes emerged as prevalent: information collection and technical. Finally, for *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional material, company and industry was the most prevalent theme.

As previously mentioned, crosstab queries and any other queries in NVivo are to help inform the results and not provide the standalone results. The following sections provide detail on how this engagement is enacted explicitly with examples from publisher promotional materials.

Mass Effect: Andromeda. *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) is a spin-off of the three-part popular *Mass Effect* series, and, while *Mass Effect 3* (2012), the previous game, did do well in sales, fans were outraged at what they believed to be a terrible ending for a beloved game.

Therefore, Electronic Arts decided to be more creative with its promotional material for *Mass*

Effect: Andromeda (2017), knowing that this game could either enable forgiveness of the past mistakes of *Mass Effect 3* (2012) or solidify fan resentment of the game. Rather than just “presenting the information,” *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) decided to tell a story in the promotional material.

Humanity is about to embark on the greatest journey yet in the history of space exploration. In 2185, the Andromeda Initiative, a privately funded organization, set out from the Milky Way. Their destination – the Andromeda Galaxy. On March 21 in North America, and March 23 in Europe, you’ll arrive in the Heleus Cluster, launching an original adventure in the Mass Effect universe...As the Pathfinder, you won't have to shoulder the responsibility of humanity's future by yourself. To explore the galaxy and find a home, you’ll build a team with members of various species and backgrounds. New friendships, rivalries, and more await. ("10 Reasons to Be Excited for Mass Effect: Andromeda," 2017)

The promotional material for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* makes for an exciting read, using terms that many *Mass Effect* fans would understand about the game. The post highlights space exploration, clusters, and a designated title, common for games developed by BioWare and produced by Electronic Arts. However, it also piques new interest in the game by saying that while the game takes places in the *Mass Effect* universe, one will have a different mission and story outside the previous games. In some ways it is a bit of a risk as the story in *Mass Effect* is one of the defining parts of the game, and fans may have wished for more of a connection with the previous games. However, the story itself, in particular, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* (2012),

was the source of fan anger, and revealing that the story will be different gives the game a chance to start fresh with an opportunity for redemption.

Mass Effect: Andromeda continued its storytelling style with its promotional material as the release date got closer. One of the last promotional posts before the game was released was a letter from a character, Alec Ryder, the father of the protagonist.

It all begins here. We're at the starting line. The Nexus is ahead, the Hyperion's engines are prepped, and your stasis pods are waiting. There's only time for a few words, so I'll be brief. I know you're nervous. There's probably a cold sweat at the base of your spine now that the hard truth of a six-hundred-year voyage is sinking in. Trust me, I know, because that's how I felt when we activated the Charon mass relay years ago. We stood together, staring into that bright blue light, not knowing where it was going to take us or if we'd even make it through alive. It was the hardest step I've ever taken, but it took humanity farther than we could have ever imagined. This is another step on humanity's great journey – the longest so far. We're leaping into the void. This time, there's no chance to turn back. But we go forward. We take that step. Because we know that whatever fate waits for us beyond dark space, we dared to be first. We'll leave footprints where no human has ever been. We'll breathe the air and drink the water of worlds we can't even imagine. We will lift our heads to the stars, and see the Milky Way from the outside for the very first time. It begins today. We're ready. Humanity's future is waiting. I'll see you in Andromeda. (S. Chandler, 2017)

While vague in relaying specific information, the promotional materials do have some key phrases that *Mass Effect* fans will understand, in particular, the mention of the Mass Relay, and the storytelling aspect helps to pique interest and put the readers in a mindset that they are going on an adventure. Moreover, it introduces the character of Alec Ryder, the original Pathfinder, before one somberly takes up the mantle in the beginning moments of the game. Consumers know enough about the game to know that they will find it familiar to the *Mass Effect* franchise they love, but the idea of the unknown, namely what the game is going to be like, what this new adventure is going to be, keeps fans engaged and also invites new fans to join in on the adventure.

Star Wars Battlefront II. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), the promotional material focused on creating active consumer engagement, highlighting the technical aspects of the game while also acknowledging that the company was listening to consumer feedback. The decision for this approach is because *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s predecessor, *Star Wars: Battlefront* (2015), excelled in consumer sales, shipping over 13 million copies by the end of the 2015 fiscal year (Osborn, 2016). Moreover, the game is an extension of culturally pervasive intellectual property: The *Star Wars* franchise. Therefore, when it came to announcements and promotional materials, Electronic Arts focused its efforts on “informing” their current fanbase but not necessarily “hyping” the game.

Just in case you're not familiar: *Star Wars Battlefront II* includes an original single-player campaign set after Return of the Jedi. You'll take on the role of Iden Versio, (played by Janina Gavankar), Commander of Imperial special forces unit Inferno Squad. Alongside her squadmates Del Meeko (T.J. Ramini) and Gideon Hask (Paul

Blackthorne), Iden struggles to maintain order in a galaxy that seems to be crumbling all around her. The new single-player campaign in *Star Wars Battlefront II* is an original story set after the events of *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*TM. It's no secret that Iden Versio and Inferno Squad will be crossing paths with some of the galaxy's most renowned characters, but they'll also be encountering elements that are initiated from other *Star Wars* stories. There are multiple mediums, comics, novels, television, films, games, and more, that tell new or unique stories that take place within the *Star Wars* universe. *Star Wars Battlefront II* helps enrich the universe by telling a previously untold story that can build upon what has already been established. Without giving too much away, here are some of the other *Star Wars* stories you might want to pick up before playing to give you some extra context. ("New *Star Wars Battlefront II* Story Trailer," 2017)

This promotional post provides necessary information about the game without too much hype. It attacks the point of what the game entails, knowing that they do not need to "hype the game." The information is more than enough to pique the interests of *Star Wars* fans and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) fans. However, while there is information, it does suffer from ambiguity, letting consumers paint a picture of what the game could be. Particularly for a franchise like *Star Wars*, where the fandom community has taken the IP to new heights with their creative works including fan fiction and fan films, leaving it up to the imagination of the consumers means that the expectations for the game may be more significant than what is possible in terms of resources.

As the release date for *Star Wars Battlefront II* got closer to the release date, the promotional material started to focus more on promoting the beta test for the game. Releasing a beta version of the game allows a company like Electronic Arts to test specific parts of the game while also responding to feedback from gamers who signed up for beta testing on what they do and do not like as well as where glitches might occur. Many of these beta testers also work as live-streamers, meaning that, even if gamers were not lucky enough to receive a pass for beta testing, they can watch live-streamers play the game and offer assessments. Therefore, a beta test works not only as another way of promotion, giving gamers a small taste in an environment that will have technical mistakes but is also an opportunity for Electronic Arts to make any necessary changes by responding to consumer feedback.

The Star Wars™ Battlefront™ II Beta is live! Don't miss a single minute of the action: a desperate prequel-era battle in the streets of Theed, an original trilogy-era dogfight in the skies above Fondor, and a Force Awakens-era Strike scenario in the forests of Takodana. Moreover, in-between multiplayer battles, have some fun on your own with single-player Arcade mode...Big as it is, the Beta represents only a tiny portion of what you'll see in the full Star Wars Battlefront II experience: eleven distinct planets of Galactic Assault, space battles across all three cinematic eras of Star Wars, an original single-player campaign, all-new modes, and fully-customizable heroes, starfighters, and trooper classes. ("The Star Wars Battlefront II Beta Is Live," 2017)

Beta tests are significant at giving a glimpse at what a future game can be and can be seen as a reward for gamers that have been patiently waiting for the game to come out. Like *Mass Effect*:

Andromeda, it only provided just enough information to pique interest but was much more straightforward in its approach.

No Man's Sky. Unlike *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) that presented just enough information to the consumers to have them get the idea, *No Man's Sky* did not hold back on its promotional material, giving consumers a taste of what the company was doing, with whom they were interviewing with, and on what the developers were currently working in the game. It is important to note that Hello Games is not Sony, but that Sony helped to publish the game. However, because Sony invested in the video game, Hello Games may have been encouraged to promote heavily so that Sony could recover its investment. With Sony's name attached to what is the most innovative video game of a generation, the company would be willing to spend extra money to ensure the game was successful and to enhance Sony's publishing pedigree.

No Man's Sky is a strange beast: an infinite, procedural galaxy filled with endless alien worlds. Art Director Grant Duncan will talk about how a tiny indie team at Hello Games has gone about creating the artwork behind *No Man's Sky*, from early concept to finalised art. Grant will talk about inspirations, pre-production and the complicated, rewarding (and sometimes messy) union between programmers and artists. ("No Man's Sky at GDC," 2015, February 20)

One particular promotional post highlighted the different types of buzz that *No Man's Sky* (2016) generated, helping to hype the excitement of the game and bringing validity to its claims as an innovative game.

For the first time in the new console cycle, there appears to be a critical mass of exciting new titles on the horizon. But developer Hello Games' upcoming *No Man's Sky* may be the most promising—and gorgeous to watch in action. → Time...

If *No Man's Sky* works, it could be extraordinary. "I personally can't wait for people to start discovering the universe," says Murray. "Not for them. For us. People will post pictures of creatures, and we won't have seen them before. Even though we sort of created the blueprint." → Entertainment Weekly...

The Hello Games team doesn't have a stand at E3. No flashing lights, no pounding music, no booth babes. But boy, has it stolen the show. Its game, *No Man's Sky* – an "open world" science - fiction game title – has arguably generated more buzz than any other title on show here in Los Angeles. → BBC News ("We're Home," 2014, June 26)

While the post itself is dedicated to re-posting comments from other news agencies, by synthesizing the comments together in one promotional post, the post highlights that this is not their perceptions of what the new agencies see as the game. These are what other groups have witnessed, and they agree, the game is going to be innovative.

Many of the promotional posts were written by lead game developer Sean Murray, which showcased that he was trying to establish an authentic relationship with fans rather than outsourcing the promotional material to a marketing department.

Hello, Sean here, working super, super hard on *No Man's Sky*. Every day, the game is getting better and better, and despite all the late nights (and early mornings) we're all

working to get it finished, and in your hands, it's amazing to see it all coming together...I've said it before, but *No Man's Sky* is the hardest thing I've ever worked on. It's even bigger than you can imagine. This is a type of game that hasn't been attempted before, by a smaller team than anyone would expect, under an intense amount of expectation. And despite all of that, development is genuinely going well. This is the hardest working, most talented team I've ever worked with, and I'm so proud of what we're doing. For all our sakes though, we get one shot to make this game and we can't mess it up. So that's what we're doing right now, and every day I feel more sure it was the right decision. Thank you so much for your support and patience. The universe will be yours very soon. (Murray, 2016, June 24).

This statement was in response to the game being delayed from June to August 2016, leaving some gamers disappointed. However, it still showcases *No Man's Sky*'s strategy, giving potential consumers an "inside look" into the development of the game and further hyping the idea that this game is so innovative that it would be well worth the delay.

Critiques By Journalists

The following sections seek to answer the following two research questions:

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are reactions by publishers regarding consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

While the games' promotional materials were an opportunity for the companies to showcase their products, the critiques provided a much different narrative that companies could not

control. Based on the results of the crosstab query, the most prevalent theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) critiques was technical features. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material, the most prevalent theme was public relations and marketing. Finally, for *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional materials, two themes emerged: company and industry, and public relations and marketing. As previously mentioned, crosstab queries and any other queries in NVivo help inform the results and do not provide the results themselves.

Mass Effect: Andromeda. The first wave of criticism erupted before the game was officially released to consumers and when early reviews started to come from third-parties. For a game that spent its time crafting promotional material based on the consumer having an immersive experience, the design of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) seemed to do the opposite.

It's not that it's terrible, just that it's not particularly interesting...And while the initial environment is somewhat breathtaking, the two that come after it are as vanilla as they get: a space station without much on it and a red rock Mars-style planet with even less on it. Throw in some bland writing, weird facial animations and a broader plot that seems at once too big to quite wrap one's head around and at times oddly mundane, and you've got a recipe for bland. (Thier, 2017)

The most cited complaint from the professional publications was the poorly developed facial animations. The Mass Effect franchise is known to produce rich characters, both in story and design. However, consumers complained that the facial animations for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* were worse than the facial animations for the first *Mass Effect* (2007), a game released ten years earlier. Some critics downplayed the facial animations controversy, arguing

that other parts of the game were worthwhile, but even they acknowledged that it could break the immersion experience.

The humans in particular don't seem to emote enough, sometimes staring blankly, or blinking at odd intervals. Andromeda crosses into the uncanny valley at times. But, honestly, in the hours that I've poured into the game, these details haven't ruined the experience. They'll briefly take me out of the moment, sure, but a few awkward seconds in, say, a 15-minute engrossing conversation with someone is minor. (P. Hernandez, 2017)

Worse yet, critiques noted that, at times, it felt like BioWare, the developer behind the *Mass Effect* franchise, and Electronic Arts were almost aware of how bad the facial animations were. In one line of dialogue, the protagonist meets up with a character called Foster Addison. In the context of the conversation, the ship has just emerged from a crisis, and the situation is tense. When approaching Foster, she becomes frustrated and vents, but calms down immediately, commenting that she was sorry and that her "face was tired," all the while not giving any sense of emotion during the moment. One critic compared *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) to another game with bad facial animations, *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). While *Horizon Zero Dawn* also suffered from problematic animations, the critic argued that its graphics and design were so beautiful that it became a work of art to be appreciated.

Horizon Zero Dawn's faces and characters look far more polished and detailed than most of the characters we've seen so far in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. In many cases,

Andromeda's characters' hair seems either glued to their heads or flails wildly for some unknown reason. On top of that, faces look oddly absent of detail, and it's not unusual to see characters suffering from some pretty frequent clipping issues. (Jecks, 2017).

In response to many of the critiques, Electronic Arts commented that the game suffered a "facial performance bug" without giving too many details on what that meant and said it would be fixed before release. Unfortunately, that did not seem to be the case, and the bad facial animations continued as well as many other technical difficulties. A few weeks following the "facial performance bug" comment, Electronic Arts executive vice president Patrick Soderlund began to make comments that he felt the criticism of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) was unfair.

I usually don't do this, but this is one of those places where I feel like the game got criticized a little bit more than it deserved. I think the game is actually a great game. Yes, we have to acknowledge the fact that there were some things that maybe we could have done better, absolutely, but as a whole, if you go in and you buy the game today with everything that's in it today, I believe that that's a game worth buying, personally.
(Chalk, 2017a)

It was not clear to whom Soderlund was referring when it came to criticism, whether it was reviewers, fans of the *Mass Effect* franchise, or individuals who purchased the video game. Regardless, consumers still began to lament about how bad *Mass Effect: Andromeda* turned out.

Not only did the criticism continue, but consumers took the time to create memes, gifs, videos, and other media to showcase how bad the technical aspects of the game were.

GIFs of gorilla walks, silly faces, and the main character's eyes darting from side to side like she's watching a high-speed game of tennis. It's been subject to a great deal of speculation over the past few months, with theories ranging from naive (EA bought BioWare and now they're all lazy) to deranged (BioWare made all the characters ugly because they're SJWs). (Schreier, 2017b)

“Social justice warrior” is a derogatory term for an individual who expresses and promotes progressive social views (Ohlheiser, 2015). Gaining prominence during the Gamergate movement, the term was quickly adopted by other groups and became so popular that it became legitimized by the Oxford Dictionary (Ohlheiser, 2015). While the critique of Electronic Arts buying BioWare was viewed as naïve by the critic, it is not necessarily without merit. *Mass Effect 1* (2007) was developed without the help of Electronic Arts. Electronic Arts purchased BioWare before the release of *Mass Effect 2* (2010), a game which garnered great reviews and sales. Unfortunately, that was not the case for *Mass Effect 3* (2012), which had an ending that consumers hated. Consumers were so upset that they blamed Electronic Arts for destroying the *Mass Effect* franchise, forgetting that Electronic Arts was the publisher when *Mass Effect 2* (2010) was released. Consumers lamented that Electronic Arts wanted to scale back a game which had the opportunity for multiple endings in previous installments of the *Mass Effect* franchise, in favor of creating a “neat” single ending.

Yes, EA has games that sell in the millions, many which are well-reviewed and some of which are genuinely loved. But the company also has a history of pumping out products,

or rushing games through development, to cash in on a brand name...Detractors accused EA of pushing [*Mass Effect 3*] out too early and focusing too much of its energy on the new multiplayer side of the game since that promised the company a revenue stream in the form of in-game microtransactions for users who want to acquire the many characters and upgrades. The reaction to ME 3 was so negative and so widely publicized, EA was compelled to release a slightly more satisfactory ending only a few months later.

(Morran, 2013)

This particular critique is interesting because, while microtransactions were not a major complaint in the release of *Mass Effect 3* (2012), it became clear that the company had been experimenting with the idea for a while as it would eventually play out in *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017).

In summary for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), it seems that the company's attempts at innovation plagued the game. For a publisher like Electronic Arts, one of the most profitable companies in the video game industry, it seems like an odd issue, especially if the company had the financial resources to develop and publish innovative games. However, companies are only as good as their last game, and while BioWare was able to regain some dignity with the release of another game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), it was still necessary for the company to succeed with *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and to save the *Mass Effect* franchise. Once it realized that it could not meet its innovative standards, vaguely showcased in its promotional material, Electronic Arts released the game and hoped a dedicated fanbase was enough to keep it afloat.

Star Wars Battlefront II. Before its release on November 17, 2017, consumers had an opportunity to play a beta version of *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) to see what the game had to offer as well as to user test aspects of the game before final release. Participants in the beta and those who were keeping track of the game's development progress were quick to criticize the game's use of loot boxes and microtransactions. As mentioned previously, microtransactions are a loathed business plan because of the attempt by game developers to get more money out of consumers. Since the practice does not seem to show any signs of slowing, some have argued that as long as the microtransactions were used for "cosmetic purchase," changes in how an item or costume would look, then the microtransactions would not be a detriment. However, Electronic Arts implemented microtransactions beyond cosmetic purchases. In particular was using microtransactions to unlock specific Star Wars characters, whom consumers thought should have already been available in the base game or should be easier to unlock. Principal characters, like Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and Leia Organa, could be unlocked by earning credits in the game after playing a variety of missions, which could then be used to purchase the heroes as mentioned earlier. However, if gamers wanted to play the characters right away, they could pay real currency to buy crystals, which could be converted to credits, which could be then used to purchase a hero. Consumers were quick to calculate how fast it would take for a player to earn enough credits to unlock a hero.

By some estimates, the likes of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader could take close to 40 hours [of gameplay] each to unlock for the player intent on not spending any money on microtransactions. Heroes cost credits in *Battlefront II*. With the average multiplayer match currently netting people somewhere between 250 and 350 for 10-15 minutes of

play, the road to buying all of them appears like it will be a long one. Luke and Vader are two of the most expensive heroes at 60,000 credits each, but even heroes like Leia and Chewbacca still cost 40,000. (Gach, 2017b)

When applied in a free-to-play game, the microtransaction business model performs a delicate balancing act. Many of these games rely on time or the game getting progressively harder to play so that impatient or impulsive gamers will spend money on microtransactions to gain an advantage. However, the game cannot be so difficult or time consuming that players feel forced to pay for these microtransactions. Where it comes to AAA video games, where games are purchased for USD 59.99, it is hard to say where that balancing act continues and whether it is even possible for an AAA video game to support a business plan, at least for unlocking characters.

When word about the microtransactions began to spread to consumers, Electronic Arts was quick to explain the reasoning behind the microtransactions. In a Reddit post, the company outlined its views that it was meant to give gamers a sense of satisfaction in earning characters. It quickly became the most down-voted Reddit post in the history of the social media platform ("Checking in with a few progression comments," 2017). That particular Reddit thread will be analyzed later as part of Study Three. Following that particular discussion, Electronic Arts drastically reduced the price for unlocking Heroes.

For many gamers, this was not enough, and they began to demand refunds for their pre-orders. However, rumors began to spread that Electronic Arts had mysteriously removed the refund option for the game. While it was not true that Electronic Arts had removed the refund

button, critics began to address the history of Electronic Arts in respect to making refunds as difficult as possible, which seemed to be the case for *Star Wars Battlefront II*.

The problem is, this story [about the refund button] doing the rounds is a bit misleading. EA hasn't suddenly removed a button that would have previously allowed a refund on a pre-ordered game. The refund button never existed for pre-ordered games in the first place. Seriously, there are forum posts going back years from people not being able to get refunds on their pre-ordered games, and being told to go through customer service, instead. Customers can still get a refund on their copies of *Battlefront II* and other titles, but they will need to go through EA's online live chat system to do so. As of writing, EA live chat has a waiting time of over an hour to reach a member of staff, so you could be there a while. Alternatively, you can wait until the game launches, at which point the refund button will appear, and you can click it for a one-step easy refund. Basically, the refund button is present for released titles, not pre-ordered ones. (Dale, 2017)

Finally, along with microtransactions, users could purchase loot crates. These loot crates offered credits, unique items, and other benefits to enhance the video game experience. However, the items which come in loot boxes come at random, and this sparked significant criticism. As a critic pointed out, "One video making the rounds that demonstrates this is from Xfactorgaming, who spent just a few hours with the game, but also dropped \$90 on a huge collection of loot boxes to try and prove this point" (Tassi, 2017). In response to the amount of money that a gamer could spend on loot boxes alone, governments began to look into whether or not loot boxes constituted as gambling and should not be sold to minors. A move of this magnitude would have

been a disaster for Electronic Arts and the video game industry as there was no real precedent for or regulations of microtransactions. Consumers hoped this would be a win for them, as it would limit how much money companies could “milk” out of consumers, but, instead, after some government investigations, those same governments stated that loot boxes did not constitute gambling. Still, the event left many companies unnerved.

Eventually, Electronic Arts disabled microtransactions entirely, saying that it was responding to players concerns that the microtransactions gave buyers an unfair advantage. In January 2018, the company reintroduced microtransactions for cosmetics only, and, in March 2018, Electronic Arts announced an overhaul for the progression and economic system. Loot crates, which now appeared randomly in the game, would only contain credits, one of the in-game currencies, and cosmetic items. The crystals, the other in-game currency, can be bought solely to purchase cosmetic items for characters in the game. The first part of this update was released on March 21st while the second part was released in April. However, a significant amount of financial damage was already done to Electronic Arts. By the end of November 2017, the company had lost \$3 billion in stock value since the launch of the game, and its share price dropped by 2.5% (Chalk, 2017b).

No Man’s Sky. When *No Man’s Sky* (2016) was released on August 9, 2016, marketing departments of video game industries took note: do not do what *No Man’s Sky* did when it came to public relations and promotions, pointing directly back to comments made by the company.

Immediately, consumers were angry that many of the features that were offered in the numerous promotional materials were not there in the final game.

...the discussion *No Man's Sky* has been stirring up hasn't been of a particularly positive nature. A large number of people are almost flat-out outraged about the final state of the product that they had been eagerly anticipating. Anticipating may be putting it lightly. From the moment the first trailer was shown in 2013, almost the entire internet lit up with excited chatter about the game. A real, infinite space sim? With procedurally generated worlds, creatures, and plants? Alien races with warring factions to run into and trade with? Space combat? Landing on meteors? The (albeit small) chance of running into another player and co-opting the game like *Journey* or *Dark Souls*? Sounds great right? (Corfield, 2016)

Upon the initial hours of release, consumers were demanding refunds for their product, mainly through the digital distribution platform service Steam, while also promoting to give the game “Mostly Negative” reviews on the platform. The demand for refunds caused problems for Hello Games, Sony, and consumers. As one journalist described:

PlayStation 4 users were infuriated over Sony’s archaic cancellation, and refund policy...As per PlayStation Store’s official documentation, the user can request for cancellation within 14 days of the purchase. However, the caveat here is that user must not have initiated the download or streamed the game. (Makwana, 2016)

Consumers were quick to point out that could not know if they would like the game if they did not play it and argued about how the video game industry was using digital technology to overcharge the consumer and force consumers to keep games they do not like only to pad

companies' bottom lines. The controversy surrounding refunds of the product got even worse when Sony Developer Sahid Kamal Ahmad tweeted, "If you're getting a refund after playing a game for 50 hours you're a thief" (Ahmad, 2016, August 28). Consumers and critics were quick to point out that it was problematic to call your consumers "thieves," especially if you have a focus on retention and loyalty. While this was the opinion of one developer, which does not necessarily apply to the views of the company, it is still a negative public relation move.

Eventually, Sony made another public relations announcement by putting the blame on Hello Games, arguing Sony had no idea the game would be so poorly developed. While critics agree that most of the blame lies with Hello Games, it was a poor move for Sony not to claim any responsibility, especially when the target is an independent developer.

The complaints about the failure to deliver on pre-release promises have focused almost exclusively on Murray. This isn't surprising because at times before the game released he seemed to be everywhere, promising everything, to anyone with a microphone and a video camera. But surely, Sony bears some responsibility for this mess. (Murnane, 2016)

When criticism of the game amplified, the previously outspoken lead developer of the game, Sean Murray, went silent for two months, leaving many to wonder what exactly he was planning. In the meantime, many started to debate whether or not Sean Murray and Hello Games lied about *No Man's Sky*. According to one critic, a month after *No Man's Sky* released, the search string "Sean Murray lies" returned 6200 hits on YouTube, with extremely critical comments (Murnane, 2016). During that time, fans became so fed up with the lack of content they were promised that they made a case to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) based in

the U.K. The organization confirmed to many news outlets that they were investigating Hello Games for false advertising (Hopkins, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

Eventually, Sony and Hello Games bowed to the pressure and started to make refunds easier for disappointed consumers. As one critic reported in an update to a previous article lamenting Sony's refund policy:

Following the sudden surge in refund requests, Steam seems to have updated *No Man's Sky* page, stating that the standard refund policy applies to the game, and no special exemptions are available. Previously, no such disclaimer existed. On the other hand, Sony is reportedly asking folks who bought the game to run some tests first to troubleshoot the game's performance, reports IGN. Once Sony verifies in-game technical snags, the refund request passes to the next step. In all fairness, folks who ideally have clocked two to four hours and faced justifiable technical glitches can have a word with the respective stores for refund eligibility. (Makwana, 2016)

However, many were quick to note that these refunds were not guaranteed and did come with caveats. In a response about refunds in the United Kingdom:

First up we spoke to PlayStation UK's customer support, who informed us consumers could request a refund, but there are a few caveats. Only people with in-game technical issues can request a refund, and you'll be required to run through a list of troubleshooting options with the customer service representative before your case is passed over to the

PlayStation investigation team, who will then decide if your case justifies a refund.
(Copeland, 2016)

While there were some technical aspects of the game that users complained about, in particular, the game crashing or graphics not developing correctly, it was clear that Sony was not responding appropriately to consumer feedback, even though in its engagement strategy, the company's focus was primarily on how it treats its consumers. When it felt pressure, Sony was quick to redirect to make it difficult for consumers to refund a product with which they were dissatisfied and went so far as to accuse those same consumers as thieves.

Eventually, Sean Murray did come out of hiding to release an update for the game around Black Friday of 2016. Hello Games acknowledged the disappointment of the release and vowed to continue to produce updates and patches to make the game users were expecting. Some critics found this statement well-crafted and confident though they questioned if the response was "too little too late."

Hello Games has responded with dignity and class throughout this entire saga. They met vitriol with restraint and did not blame game players, Sony or anyone else when they were the focus of withering criticism. That being said, *No Man's Sky* is likely to be at or near the top of almost every "Disappointing games of the year" list for 2016. And for a good reason. (Murnane, 2016)

After the first "Foundation Update," released on Black Friday, the ASA concluded its investigation arguing that *No Man's Sky* did not mislead consumers, leaving many frustrated.

The argument behind this decision was acknowledging innovations that Hello Games wanted for the game turned out to be more difficult than expected or were not as innovative as posited (Yin-Poole, 2016b). Despite this disappointment to consumers feeling like they had been misled, there does not seem to be a fear that video game developers and publishers will not take advantage of borderline misleading advertising. It was clear that Hello Games put in more than what was promised, even if the promises had good intentions.

Discussion

This chapter explored how companies' information and the fallout from their products illustrated how consumers react to and engage with AAA video game publishers, answering the two research questions:

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are publisher reactions to consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

Regarding promotional material, a macro analysis using the crosstab query indicated the most prevalent theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) promotional material texts was public relations and marketing. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material texts, two themes emerged as prevalent: information collection and technical. Finally, for *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional material texts, company & industry, was the most prevalent theme. For critiques by journalists, the most prevalent theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) critiques was technical features. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material, the most

prevalent theme was public relations and marketing. Finally, for *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional materials, two themes emerged: company and industry, and public relations and marketing. Since the macro analysis only gives the researcher a surface level understanding to answering these questions, a more in-depth analysis into the text was conducted to explore the context of the engagement.

Resulting from the analyses, companies are capable of providing specific information about their companies and products but do engage in differing strategies on how the information is presented. It is clear that the information is well thought out in its presentation and that the companies are clear and concise with their expectations. However, as seen with the comments synthesized in the journalist critiques, when criticism was launched against a company, it was more detailed, and many times warranted when it came to citing the promotional material.

While there were only three articles related to answering RQ3, the more in-depth analysis provided some interesting insights into how journalists portray comments by publishers. There have been many claims by video game consumers, which gained momentum as the result of the #GamerGate movement, that video game journalists tend to favor publishers over gamers when representing the power struggles between the two (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009; Perreault & Vos, 2018). That #GamerGate is “unfairly maligned” as a toxic, sexist group targeting SJW critics is proof that video game journalism unfairly represents gamers in favor of publishers (Braithwaite, 2016).

However, regarding these examples of publisher responses, the journalists expressed caution at the publishers’ statements, acknowledging that while it was good for publishers to respond, with the exception to the antagonistic Ahmad tweet, the responses either came too late, or showcased a lack of understanding to consumer concerns. But the journalists do not go so far

as to show solidarity with gamers entirely. Many of the journalists' comments focused on how consumers may have overhyped a game, or the concerns associated with the game, and that a lack of understanding about the development cycle of a game may have contributed to games failing. In the end, journalists were as quick to condemn the publishers' actions and responses, as well as consumer reactions.

Limitations and future research

There are some significant limitations to consider for Study Two, the first since despite relying on promotional material as a way to analyze how the companies may try to engage with their consumers; it does not necessarily depict the companies' intended engagement message. Without explicitly asking company representatives, the researcher could make inferences based on the companies' perception, and therefore, cannot determine if the company is practicing sustainable consumer engagement as argued by marketing research (Kumar, Aksoy, et al., 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Accordingly, future research should explore the organizational side of consumer engagement, looking at the initial strategies for engagement, and how these strategies have evolved based on consumer reactions, the number of resources used, and other variables. While this research can take the form of case studies and reading textual documents, a more well-rounded study should rely on observations, interviews, and focus groups with company representatives.

A second limitation was the uneven number of sources for each case study. The number of sources for promotional materials and critiques for *No Man's Sky* (2016) was more than the promotional materials and critiques for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) combined. While insights were gleaned in Study Two about the choice to be so transparent with information, it also meant that more inferences could be made about *No*

Man's Sky (2016) and consumer engagement, than *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) or *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). Moreover, many of the critiques for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) kept repeating stories of consumer criticism; therefore, there was not much variety to choose from concerning text. While the researcher made attempts to get as many items of text possible like broadening parameters for date ranges or connecting topics that were indirectly related to the case studies (e.g., Electronic Arts as the “worst company” in America), it was still difficult to obtain quality data. As a way to combat this limitation, an opportunity for future research is to analyze video game industry news and fan blogs. While professional trade journals offer credibility by hiring professional writers and requiring a peer editing process, consumers may prefer to get their news for a fan blog that they either find more informative or more entertaining. These blogs might offer extra commentary that a professional trade journal may not offer. Future research can compare the textual data between trade journals and blogs. Moreover, researchers can survey gamers on their opinions regarding different video game news sources and could provide insight into how they feel these sources represent them as gamers.

Finally, when it comes to video games, the researcher is not an outsider to the gaming community. While the researcher strived to maintain an objective stance during data collection and analysis, the researcher has personal opinions about what qualifies and is credible, video game news based on skills as a researcher and personal experience in the gaming community. Therefore, while this researcher might find an article to be credible and filled with useful information, another gamer may differ on the quality of the source, as well as how the information is perceived from the text.

Conclusion

Cases like this, when a game goes bad, is not only a fiscal disaster for companies but potentially a legal one as well as seen with *No Man's Sky* and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). In the final study of the dissertation, Study Three provides an analysis of these consumer comments, providing more evidence of how video game consumers engage with other consumers when dealing with AAA publishers. Study Three presents an alternative way of describing consumer engagement, forgoing the traditional sources of information that a company may rely on for consumer feedback, but investigating the areas where conversations are taking place. While these conversations will be explored as a separate study, the discussion of Study Three will compare results to see if there are similar insights of consumer engagement between the primary sources of conversations (Study Three) versus the secondary reporting of these conversations (Study Two). The researcher will examine similarities and differences, providing insights into how video game consumer engagement is being portrayed.

CHAPTER IV

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF REDDIT FORUMS FOR AAA VIDEO GAMES

Overview

The purpose of Study Three is examine the consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement conversations of video game consumers on a digital communication platform. Using qualitative analysis, the researcher explored user discussions and experiences through three forums (called “subreddits”) on the social media platform Reddit that were related to each of the game case studies to see what these engagement practices looked like in action (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Smith & Taylor, 2017; Vorvoreanu, 2009). The subreddits are r/NoMansSky, r/MassEffectAndromeda, and r/StarWarsBattlefront, which correspond to the negatively-reviewed games presented in Study Two (Chapter III). The examination of texts provides evidence of communication engagement practices among consumers.

The organization of this study is as follows: (1) a brief review of literature previously established in Chapter I that is related to Study Three, including research questions; (2) the methodology for Study Three, including the collection of data and how it was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software; (3) the results including examples of important themes and texts gleaned from analysis; and (4) a brief discussion including limitations and directions for future research.

Video Game Culture and the Industry

Over the years, a paradigm debate has waged in media fandoms, including video games: Do consumers act as active audience members (active audience theory), or are they blindly controlled by an organization (culture industry theory)?

The active audience in cultural studies suggests that the audience members of a product are active participators, contributing and defining how the product is depicted within the broader cultural scene (Bolin, 2012). The active audience theory argues that audience members are not passively receiving information but are instead actively involved in how media messages are perceived (D. Chandler & Munday, 2011). The perceptual decoding of media messages can influence values, norms, and experiences for both the personal and social self.

Culture industries is a critical theory arguing that culture acts as a factory of pre-manufactured goods that the audience blindly consumes, regardless of the resources available (Horkheimer et al., 2002). The theory argues that the control of culture primarily rests on the organizations or groups that create the cultural product, and not the group which consumes it.

In the realm of video game culture, these competing paradigms create conflict between consumers and publishers. On the one hand, it is the job of the publisher to mass-produce video games and to continually make money, and publishers need to protect their intellectual property. However, for the video game industry to survive, gamers need to do more than just purchase and consume games. A game's legitimacy and validity rely on how consumers engage with a product beyond playability, including discussing the game on forums, visiting conventions, and even creating modifications for the game in order to express creativity (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). In summary, both publishers and gamers are vying for gaming capital in the culture.

As stated previously in Chapter III, the video game industry has tried to commodify gaming capital, with varying degrees of success. Gaming capital is defined as “the dynamism of gameplay as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry” (Consalvo, 2009a, p. 4). The video game industry had the primary control of the information from its inception, which was

disseminated to gamers through promotional material and gaming trade journals (Donovan, 2010). In controlling the information, the industry was able to target the customer segment directly and to control the population they wanted to sell too. However, an increase in technological access by consumers has allowed gamers to quickly accrue gaming capital as well (N. T. Taylor, 2016).

The video game industry is not unique in that it chooses to engage, but it is unique in that consumers are perceived as actively reciprocating that engagement, while also communicating their expectations to the industry. The quantity of this communication provides an access point for data collection that can provide insight into consumer engagement. However, though it is assumed that consumers of video games may be interested in engaging and being engaged, their views of what engagement looks like may differ from previous academic and working definitions.

The gamer culture itself has demonstrated that at times game players are motivated to mobilize and connect with other gamers in order to discuss concerns they have about the industry (Tassi, 2014). Academic accounts often try to present the gamer's side of the story, whereas journalists and outside interest groups tend to "otherize" gamers as a distinct culture (Shaw, 2010). When exploring how video game consumers engage with publishers and other consumers, research must look at how engagement is perceived from different perspectives. Chapter IV (Study Three) explores the consumer perspective of engagement on the social media platform Reddit.

Engagement Theory

As also stated previously in Chapter III, engagement is a socially responsive approach to organizational communication, where the outcomes of the organization align with the wants and needs of society (Men & Tsai, 2013).

Bishop and Davis (2002) argue participation involves an expectation by community members to have a voice and to influence when it comes to organizational outcomes. Smith and Taylor's (2017) investigation of people's motives for communicating through social media and perceptions of their ability to influence others revealed respondents primarily used social media to satisfy information needs and social interaction needs, especially with particular individuals and groups. Some people reported they believed they could influence others by providing high-quality information and creating awareness; they described their sphere of influence as limited to their social networks or participation in groups. Interestingly, most respondents reported they rarely communicated with organizations on social media, and when they did, they did not feel they could influence those organizations. However, they consumed organizations' promotional content and sought to influence their networks by sharing opinions about organizations' products, services, and issues related to the organizations. These respondents felt their influence arose through information-sharing and, thus, their influence on organizations was primarily indirect. In contrast, those who felt they could exercise more direct influence on organizations attributed their influence ability to the nature of their relationships with the organization.

Smith and Taylor (2017) illuminates several essential points to consider in this project. They suggest that information-sharing between social media users, such as video gamers sharing information and opinions with other gamers via social media, can be seen as a means to an end, and both the means and ends involve engagement processes. Creating and revealing a consensus

among several gamers may contribute to the perception that there is power in numbers. This peer-to-peer engagement creates social capital. Smith and Taylor also note that the respondents who "sought influence over an organization often did so from the context of self-interested entitlement based on their position or attachment to the organization" (p. 159), what Kang (2014) terms "sense of authorization to act."

Therefore, to understand the context of these conversations, and how gamers may use peer-to-peer engagement to create connections with one another, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How are consumer conversations about three negatively reviewed games enacted on Reddit forums?

While it is necessary to understand how a consumer may view ideal organizational engagement, it is equally necessary to determine how consumers perceive engagement as it exists now, while also comparing it to outsider perceptions. While some consumers may have their expectations met by organizations, others may feel that they are being ignored or engaged inappropriately. From an organizational perspective, a truly engaged organization tries to understand and meet the needs of its consumers. However, these needs are filtered through a lens of the organization's needs, which primarily come first. It is essential to examine what concerns motivate consumers of video games the most in engaging and influencing an organization to understand their perceptions and expectations better.

Therefore, Study Three proposes the final research question:

RQ2: How do consumer to consumer conversations on Reddit in Study Three compare to journalists' representations in Study Two?

Method

Collection of Reddit Threads

Reddit is a popular social aggregation and discussion website where links, text posts, and images may be submitted. The threads are then voted up or down by other registered members, who can also leave comments. Though Reddit contributors must be registered to participate in the community, the majority of threads are open to public viewing. Posts are organized by subject into user-created boards called "subreddits," which cover a variety of topics, including video games. Users may subscribe to these subreddits to see these posts on their Reddit newsfeed, known as a "front page," but do not need to subscribe to the subreddit to post or comment. Submissions with more upvotes appear toward the top of the user's subreddit. Subreddit posts can be filtered through the website's algorithm systems based on the number of comments they have received as well as how many up and down votes. Threads can be considered "hot," "new," "rising," "controversial," and "top," which are defined in the Reddit algorithm filtering system. Threads that are considered "hot" receive the most replies and votes, usually appear on a user's front page, and must be active for at least 12 hours and have ten times as many votes as a new post to appear at similar ranks (Silverman, 2012). "New" and "rising" define threads that have been recently posted and are gaining activity. "Controversial" threads are the "battleground threads" where the posts have a relatively even amount of upvotes and downvotes, meaning there are active debates (Silverman, 2012). Finally, "top" threads have the most upvotes.

These categories can be used to filter out posts based on dates, specifically within the last day, month, year, or entire existence of the subreddit. Reddit has become a widely accessible tool and method for recruiting participants and collecting data (Shatz, 2017), and the diversity of

Reddit participants is considered advantageous for data collection. Reddit and Amazon MTurk offer similar advantages regarding sample diversity, the reliability of measures, and the validity of data (Jamnik & Lane, 2017). With the filtering system, the researcher can effectively identify the most appropriate Reddit posts in a subreddit for analysis.

Three subreddits were chosen for analysis: r/MassEffectAndromeda, r/NoMansSky, and r/StarWarsBattlefront. Analyzing these subreddits was a methodological decision based on their relational dynamic and content immediacy to the case studies described in Chapter III; additionally, they are the most easily identifiable in Reddit when discussing these games.

For these three video game subreddits, ten posts (or threads) were selected based on community discussion related to the publisher, developer, or personal opinions about the game. Through its algorithm, Reddit had labeled these posts as "Controversial" or "Hot" for "All Time," indicating that substantial conversations and debate were surrounding the thread. For each thread, up to 200 comments were analyzed by the researcher, which were filtered by Reddit's algorithm as being the "best" comments. Votes determine the best comments from users, who use a system of upvotes or downvotes based on whether they feel the comment contains high quality or whether they agree or disagree with the comment. There is no way to determine why a user upvoted or downvoted a comment.

Threads and comments were extracted from Reddit using Google Sheets. Using the IMPORTRSS function, available through Google Sheets, the researcher retrieved the data and exported it into Microsoft Excel. The comments from Microsoft Excel were then exported as a dataset into NVivo and coded into nodes based on the 30 original posts of the thread and the 2,455 filtered replies. Replies were filtered out based on if the comment was previously deleted by the Reddit user (indicated by a "[deleted]" tag), if the comment was specifically used to

harass or “troll” another user, and if the comment only contained short responses that did not contribute any meaningful input (e.g., “okay,” “don't think so”).

NVivo Analysis

Similar to the qualitative analyses for Study Two, a constant comparison analysis was used to “break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize [the] data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 61), using the QDAS software NVivo. As discussed in Chapter III, the emphasis of the NVivo program is on “assistance” rather than “answering” by using “cases,” “nodes,” and “queries” to find and determine meaning. NVivo does not provide any answers to the research questions but assists the researcher in finding answers through constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) thereby not “[supplanting] time-honoured ways of learning from data” (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 2). Most importantly, using NVivo or any QDAS allows the researcher to capture “what is most important, most prevalent, [and] most essential in the thousands of words dealing with the object of investigation” (Thompson, 2002, p. 16). Table 3, which was also provided in Chapter III (Table 1) presents an understanding of NVivo’s Terms and Functions.

Table 3 NVivo Functions - Adapted from Houghton et al. (2017)

| <u>NVivo Functions</u> | <u>Purpose</u> | <u>Application in Dissertation</u> |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Cases | Cases are units of analysis and observation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). | Each item of text for analysis was imported as a case, and organized by study, company, game, and document type (e.g., Study Three -> MEA -> [Title of Thread]) |
| Nodes | Nodes create categorical distinctions or themes within in the documents (Dennis & Bower, 2008; Krippendorf, 2004) | Nodes in the study were the leading collection of emergent themes from the study. The nodes helped to organize themes and can be combined if the researcher determines it is necessary. |
| Queries | Queries ask questions of the qualitative data, and the program retrieves from the database all information relevant to determining an answer to those questions. Results of queries are saved to allow further interrogation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). | To determine emergent themes that came from the sources, a word frequency query was conducted, assessing the context around the word through the word tree function. The context itself would be the deciding factor for the theme. The minimum word length was five but also included stemmed words to ensure a higher quality collection of themes. |
| Matrices | Matrices can cross-tabulate related information in the database through the use of queries (Casey et al., 2016) | A crosstab query was used in Study Three to help inform the organization of results. |

Each specific Reddit thread was converted into a case. Both the original post (OP) and the replies to the post were analyzed for themes and keywords. While the original post is the foundation of the thread, users can reply however they wish in a thread and not directly at the OP. Therefore, other themes outside of what was established by the OP may appear in a thread. Using constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), emergent themes were initially

coded into nodes by using open-coding, that is, “The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 61).

For Study Three, the researcher already had a list of themes and keywords compiled from Study Two; therefore, the first part of the open-coding entailed using a text search query to determine textually emergent themes. Text search queries allowed the researcher to find all occurrences of a word(s) or phrase(s) in a source determined by the researcher (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

After the initial text search query, a word frequency query was conducted. For the word frequency query, the researcher specifically looked for words not only based on frequency but also in connection to consumer engagement interpreted by the researcher (e.g., customer, marketing, company, feedback, etc.). The minimum character word length was five but also included stemmed words to ensure a better collection of themes concerning quantity and quality. To ensure the context of the word, the word tree function was implemented to ensure specific words were similar in context (e.g., see Chapter III). When the researcher approved a word and context, the items were coded and placed in its nodes, titled by the word. As more words were discovered, the researcher grouped similar nodes by determining overarching themes and interpreting the commonalities within themes to provide descriptions. The constant comparison analysis allowed the researcher to alternate between words and themes to determine where they would be best defined based on the word frequency queries.

As with Study Two, the word frequency and text search queries would operate as a cycle, identifying words that would be coded into themes. Keywords for text search queries proved useful in data coding sources not yet queried to gather data efficiently, and then a word frequency query would be done once the researcher completed text queries. This cycle would

continue until all textual sources had gone through both a word frequency and a text search query.

Along with the previous six themes established from Study Two, three new themes emerged from the Reddit data: consumers and actions, expectations, and microtransactions and loot boxes. Table 4 provides a compiled list of all themes in Study Three, bolding the specific themes, which were identified in Study Three. Definitions were created based around the keywords used from the word frequency and the context of how keywords were used.

Table 4 Study Three NVivo Themes

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>Description of Theme</u> | <u>Keywords Collected from Word Frequency and Used in Text Search Query</u> |
|--|--|--|
| Company & Industry | Items that mention the company and the product the company has created. | Company, product, features, corporate, EA, Electronic Arts, Sony, Sean |
| Consumers & Actions³ | Descriptions of consumers or users of video games, and their actions (e.g., complaining) | Consumer, customer, community, fan, Problems, complain, complaint |
| Expectations | What expectations consumers had regarding the product or publisher response | Expect |
| Honesty & Deception | Items that mention perceived dishonest actions by the company | False, honesty, dishonesty, lies, unethical, truth |
| Information Collection | Items related to publishers collecting information and providing responses to feedback | Collect, information, feedback, concerns, listening, address |
| Microtransactions & Loot Boxes | References to the business practice where games will charge extra from the original price point for content or upgrades | Loot, microtransactions, freemium |
| Monetary Value | Items referring to the purchase of a product, how much a game costs, and receiving refunds | Refund, money, purchase, price, arbitration, bought, buy, cost |
| Public Relations & Marketing | Items involving marketing tactics and how products are promoted | Launch, advertising, marketing, release |
| Technical Features | References to the technical features of the game | Access, issues, update, patch, development, developer, mechanics, content, animations, graphics, graphical |

³ Consumers & Actions, Expectations, and Microtransactions & Loot Boxes were added as part of the initial set of themes.

After identifying the themes, the researcher conducted a crosstab query to determine how the emergent themes were common in each subreddit case. Crosstab queries provide a quick way to check the frequency and spread of coding across cases and help to inform research results (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). In retrieving the results from the query, the researcher applied shading to see patterns in the matrix quickly. The shading provides an extra level of accuracy in determining which themes are most common in a document or type of document because, while a frequency count may be higher for one theme, a shade indicates that the difference between frequencies may be insignificant (see Appendix E).

Results

While this crosstab query was used to help inform the results between the three subreddits, the section will also heavily focus on the impact of each thread to understand the complexity of conversations taking place. For the ten threads analyzed for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), the most common of the conversations was consumers and actions. For *No Man's Sky* (2016), the most common theme was company and industry. Finally, for *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), two themes were common in the conversations: consumer actions and monetary value. While the most prevalent theme of all ten threads for each subreddit was analyzed, each thread was also analyzed to determine its most common theme. It was possible for more than one theme to emerge from an individual thread

Comments used in this dissertation were directly copied and pasted from the website to help further understand the conversations that took place on the three subreddits and how they contributed to the dissertation. Many of these comments have incorrect spelling and grammar and contain strong language that readers may find unsuitable. The decision to keep the comments

verbatim helps to preserve the feel of the conversations, especially in consideration of the environment in which they have taken place.

Mass Effect: Andromeda

Due to the size of the matrix table output provided by NVivo, the researcher truncated the results into a table for more natural understanding. The table below provides the title for each thread, and which was the most prevalent theme in that thread.

Table 5 Mass Effect: Andromeda Reddit Themes

| <u>Thread Title</u> | <u>Most Prevalent Theme(s)</u> |
|---|---|
| To All Those Who Are "Not Sure Why ME: A Has So Much Hate." | Consumers & Actions |
| A brief rant to bioware about the multiplayer | Consumers & Actions |
| {Spoilers} Why does this game feel so unfinished | Consumers & Actions |
| A Conspiracy to Discredit Mass Effect: Andromeda? | Consumers & Actions, Technical Features |
| Who is NOT buying the game/cancelled pre-order due to the reviews and what was the deal breaker? ((please no spoilers)) | Monetary |
| Bioware has a violent racist developer for Mass Effect Andromeda. See links. Decide if you want to give your money to support this. | Company & Industry, Consumers & Actions |
| I don't understand how this is a release ready game. | Technical Features |
| So how's the game now? | Technical Features |
| How to NOT enjoy Mass Effect Andromeda | Technical Features |
| Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate. | Consumers & Actions |

Titles like “A brief rant to bioware about the multiplayer,” or “I do not understand how this is a release ready game,” beg questions about how the company failed to provide a decent product to its consumers. One user complained, “I’ve never been one to skip over a game because of graphics but I can’t take the game seriously when any talking character looks like they are trying to squeeze an invisible hot dog through their lips” (“I don’t understand how this is a release ready game,” 2017).

Most of the comments related to posts like this seemed to corroborate sentiments expressed in negative posts (i.e., consumers did not like the game). One user provides an assumption as to why Electronic Arts did such a poor job with the game, stating, “As someone else mentioned in another post, EA likely rushed it out for this financial quarter. From what I’ve heard regarding the single player, it does sound rushed and unfinished” (“I don’t understand how this is a release ready game,” 2017). This assumption is correct as revealed in one of the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) journalist critiques, which explored the “development hell” in which the game found itself (Schreier, 2017b). There is no indication that this user (or any of those users) read the article or researched the development issues of the game. However, by looking at the issues they have with the game and, based on previous experiences with mediocre games, users offered critiques as to why a game that was supposed to be a comeback for the *Mass Effect* franchise ended up the antithesis.

In critical posts about the game, there were discussions on what counted as “real” issues with the game, meaning which ones were the problems that gamers should complain about and which ones were easy fixes on which gamers nitpicked.

I'd rather they fix the connectivity issues, so the game doesn't crash every other match I'm in. ("A brief rant to bioware about the multiplayer," 2017)

For this style of game, open world rpg, this number of bugs are fairly common. My only gripe is that this game got slammed by reviewers for many of the same things recent similar style games got a pass on. ("10 Reasons to Be Excited for Mass Effect: Andromeda," 2017)

Though there were far more comments and replies that critiqued the game, some OPs were critical of the *Mass Effect* fan community itself. In a post entitled “How to NOT enjoy *Mass Effect Andromeda*,” the original poster laid out an aggressive satire that illustrated what the fanbase posited about the game and highlighted that negative comments were overreactions.

Step 1: DO NOT formulate your own opinion. This is absolutely essential. From here on out, make sure you believe everything you hear about how bad the experience is and refuse any objectivity. The goal here is to create a foundation of distaste before you even start. You will find that it makes a vast difference straight out the gate!

Step 2: Compare every feature in the game to whatever title did it best. By doing this, you will create an impossible standard for the complete product and everything will look like shit. Example: the animations aren't as good The Witcher, the driving isn't as fluid as Forza Motorsport 6, the sex isn't as good as real life, etc. You want to set the bar higher than any game has ever accomplished and then use that to disappoint yourself.

Step 3: Cherry pick the flaws, puree them into a concentrated paste, and smear them on your metaphoric lenses. If one animation looks bad, all the animation are bad. If one line of dialogue is poorly voice acted, they all are. Try to take what you learned from step 2 and you will be able to hate at a new level. Just be careful not to formulate an opinion, what you are going for is blind hate.

Step 4: Spread your hate like a Jehovah's Witness. Go door to door, preach on the streets, Internet, wherever you can be heard. Do not accept any difference of opinion, you have to believe your warped doctrine that you have adopted is right! ("How to NOT enjoy Mass Effect Andromeda," 2017)

Some users were quick to express the similar sentiment that if they expressed interest or enjoyment in the game, other consumers were quick to judge them. Gatekeeping is criticized in fandom communities, in which groups of people determine who the "real" fans of the franchise are and what should be the accepted opinions of fan work (W. Phillips, 2015).

Realistically, gatekeepers are often derided and labeled as toxic in a community; however, this has not stopped individuals from making determinations or stopped people from identifying someone as a gatekeeper when a user expresses disagreement at another's opinion. However, many users were quick to tell the poster of the OP that they were wrong and that the post was passive-aggressive against people who had, what they believed, legitimate complaints about the game. One user was quick to parody the post in a reply.

How to fanboy Andromeda:

- Write a post ignoring good points of critics

- Misrepresent others' points of view into an easily defeatable narrative
- Claim it is 'Hate' critics are spreading and that they are fervent fanatics while doing so
- Call all critics of the game mindless sheep

Oh hey, just realized OP is 4/4, nice work! ("How to NOT enjoy Mass Effect Andromeda," 2017)

"Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," had the most comments at 142. Its number of comments is due in part to the OP being in support of the game, which, as the last comments analyzed, seems to go against the majority of people who participate in r/MassEffectAndromeda. The OP is long, but the user presents a summary to explicate better the comments being made. Summaries are indicated by the label TL;DR, which translates to "Too Long; Didn't Read."

TL;DR this game is not perfect but it is an incredible ride and this weird hate train filled with comparisons to the original trilogy will only derail the franchise, and prevent developers from adding to the Mass Effect universe. Do we really want more of the same? ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017)

Some comments expressed similar sentiments to the OP, and some comments respectfully disagreed with the OP's opinions but acknowledged that ultimate "haters" and "fanboys" should be called out for extreme behavior. In this case, extreme behaviors are categorized as behaviors

that suggest a user's belief in something is a correct belief (since it exists in the mind of a user), and people who disagree should be criticized and maligned.

However, this particular thread quickly turned into a conversation about social justice warriors (SJWs). As previously mentioned, an SJW is a derogatory term for an individual who expresses and promotes progressive social views (Ohlheiser, 2015). While the OP did not mention SJWs, a user felt that it was because of SJWs that the game was so problematic.

The SJW crowd are the ones crying about conversations not playing our realistically enough, like they get to decide how a character they created would talk. I'm stating my bias; the overly ridiculous SJW scene will fucking hate *everything*. ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017)

BioWare and Electronic Arts have company policies that focus on inclusivity and diversity. Through its games, it attempts to include characters from historically marginalized groups, including women, persons of color, people with disabilities, and people of diverse sexual identities. While many have praised the inclusion of such characters (Pearson, 2016; Sarker, 2015; Sinclair, 2018b), the company has also been criticized for creating “weird” dialogue in the game as an attempt to “force the issue” rather than cultivate dialogue that represented a more organic conversation that might produce a more subtle approach to culturally othered populations and practices.

The only SJW thing that really bugged me was Hainly Addams (I think that was the name) they made it a point to have some throw away dialogue saying she had a sex

change. Literally adds nothing to the character. I heard they changed that in the patch, but I'm not sure. ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017)

What is notable in the discussion about inclusivity initiatives and SJWs in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is the inclusion of a scientist character whose deeply held faith includes the tenet of Creationism. Users on the thread complained about the absurdity of having a character who is both a scientist and a creationist. One user argued, "Same with Suvi's faith, I was like wait why is my science officer a creationist, wasn't there any 'non-crazy' scientists left for the Pathfinder crew after the flight from the Milkyway" ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017). However, some users were quick to point out that blaming SJWs was either an easy answer or a lazy excuse. One user argued, "It's just trendy to hate Bioware as an 'SJW' company, so the Reddit hivemind criticizes it for the same things that are found in nearly all new games" ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017). Similarly, other users suggested that quick judgments of characters were not the fault of BioWare and that players may have missed some nuance when interpreting the inclusion of these characters.

Why is Suvi's faith a problem? That's not a developer issue or character issue, that's you just not liking her because she is a creationist. Is it BW fault for you not liking a character? No. People need to stop saying characters are bad simply because they don't like the characters' Personality ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017)

The biggest issue people have with Suvi's religiousness is that your response to it when she says is either "Yes I am religious too" or "Pfft, religion?? Here's a little book called the God Delusion". Not that she's religious but that you can't be subtle about it. ("Why are people so eager to hate this game? - I am seriously concerned regarding the hate," 2017)

Discussions about SJWs and BioWare expands into other discussions on the Reddit. The thread that had the most discussed themes related to social justice was "BioWare has a violent racist developer for *Mass Effect Andromeda*. See links. Decide if you want to give your money to support this." The OP post links to the posts of a developer making comments perceived to be racist against white people, touching on themes about the company, consumer reactions, and company values. The comments were featured on the developer's private social media channels, and the only affiliation to BioWare and Electronic Arts is as the employer.

Such comments led to discussions about whether one can be racist toward white people or whether his comments could count as violent rather than to a discussion about the game itself. Instead, discussions focused on what it meant for BioWare and Electronic Arts to be a diverse and inclusive company, and, simultaneously, what diversity and inclusivity constitute. According to users who supported the sentiment of the thread, by the company's standards, this developer should be fired because the rhetoric incites violence against a particular group. Since Electronic Arts did not fire him (the developer ended up leaving of his own volition before the release of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*), the company is hypocritical about their values and appear disingenuous toward diversity and inclusivity. Overall, the thread sparked numerous discussions,

but most of the comments argued that one developer does not necessarily impact whether one should support or purchase the game.

You're not supporting racism if you buy the game, you support the developers so they can make more games ("Bioware has a violent racist developer for Mass Effect Andromeda. See links. Decide if you want to give your money to support this.," 2017)

If my pizza man was racist I wouldn't care as long as my pizza wasn't racist. ("Bioware has a violent racist developer for Mass Effect Andromeda. See links. Decide if you want to give your money to support this.," 2017)

Other users commented that this was an attempt by members to create a problem that did not exist to prevent people from buying the game. In particular, one user decided to purchase the game based on the post, declaring, "I can honestly say this alt-right witch hunt just made me pre-order this when I was on the fence about the game ("Bioware has a violent racist developer for Mass Effect Andromeda. See links. Decide if you want to give your money to support this.," 2017).

While posts about SJWs and inclusivity do not necessarily contribute to discussions about why *Mass Effect: Andromeda* failed regarding technical difficulties, it does contribute to the company's ethos and, thus, the game's credibility. Electronic Arts, by admission, seeks to create innovative and inclusive games. The question for this particular discussion is whether Electronic Arts and, by extension, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, should focus more on inclusivity in its gaming narrative rather than technical features. The short answer is "no" because, even with complaints

about too much focus on inclusivity, the complaints have focused on how the game was rushed and, therefore, underdeveloped. When these same posts revealed the new patches that were released later in 2017, many users who had previously complained about the technical glitches of the game welcomed the new changes, arguing that the game was much better.

No Man's Sky

The examination of the threads of r/NoMansSky provided a mix of critique and praise, demonstrating why *No Man's Sky* (2016) did so poorly on release. The original discussions surrounding the game's subreddit focused on transparency, and, particularly, the actions of the company, which paralleled journalistic critiques of *No Man's Sky* in Study Two. Discussions also included a greater range of themes compared to r/MassEffectAndromeda about consumers and actions, monetary value, and public relations and promotions. The table below provides the title for each thread and the most prevalent theme in each thread.

Table 6 No Man's Sky Reddit Themes

| <u>Thread Title</u> | <u>Most Prevalent Theme(s)</u> |
|---|---|
| Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund | Company & Industry, Public Relations & Marketing |
| As if programming a game wasn't difficult enough, now you have to cope with millions of kids complaining at launch. | Company & Industry, Consumers & Actions, Monetary, Public Relations & Marketing |
| Quotes for those who think that Sean is a liar | Company & Industry |
| Bandwagon hate and the need for education of the development cycle | Company & Industry |
| Sean Murray is a person | Company & Industry |
| PSA: This is the worst \$60 I've ever spent on a game... ever | Monetary Value |
| Hello Games, the game should never have been released on PC in it's current state, you should be ashamed. | Public Relations & Marketing |
| BREAKING: Missing developer Sean Murray found! - A chronology of events since launch | Company & Industry |
| TIL anybody that defends the game or HG is a fanboy and also that not many people understand what a lie is. | Company & Industry |
| So, why did this game get such a bad rap? I'm having a blast. | Monetary Value |

Four of the ten posts focused on the company, namely the lead developer Sean Murray. Upon release of the game, the once vocal Hello Games went silent when comments from consumers and journalists about technical difficulties, missing features that were promised, and a bland premise emerged. Many gamers were frustrated by the lack of communication after the release of the game and felt the company was being unresponsive and losing its ethos.

There have been numerous professional articles from sites like Polygon and youtubers pointing out how the utter lack of communication from Sean about the game's issues killed this game's reputation and that of Hello Games. ("Breaking: Missing developer Sean Murray found! - A chronology of events since launch.," 2016)

Everyone keeps telling them "**Your lack of communication is killing the game.*" and they still refuse to communicate. ("Breaking: Missing developer Sean Murray found! - A chronology of events since launch.," 2016)

This lack of communication was defended by some users who argued that the developers were silent because they were focused on fixing bugs in the game. Two particular threads focused on this argument, saying it was unfair to expect developers to communicate when they are trying to fix the game and that consumers maintained over-inflated expectations.

Sean abandoned EA (and he had a way better job that he's been having these last years) and sold his house to develop games, Hello Games flooded, received death threats, was put under the pressure of being developing one of the most anticipated games for years, with a team of 12-15 people, working shifts of 15 hours, I don't know many developers who would do any of that, to be honest. And now, after launch, it's totally acceptable to complain if we can't see other players as it was promised, but what's the point at insulting these gals and guys? Will it make them hear you louder? All you've done these past days is burying under stupidity the wait of many users and the work of many developers. ("As

if programming a game wasn't difficult enough, now you have to cope with millions of kids complaining at launch," 2016)

I don't understand why people want Sean to talk to so much. Would you go on the internet if thousands of people were calling you names? Nobody thought about the fact that it's different to bash a faceless corporation than it is to bash one individual. ("Sean Murray is a person," 2016)

In another Reddit thread, a user criticized others for not understanding the development cycle and relying on “bandwagon hate.”

I feel like the main reason for this hate is that people are becoming less independent thinking and we are seeing more and more people who enjoy to jump on the bandwagon of hating something. I have noticed this becoming more and more common recently, whether it be people hating on celebrities, movies or games. ("Bandwagon hate and the need for education of the development cycle," 2016)

What is interesting about these particular OPs is that they did not contest whether the game was good or bad. Instead, they requested the users to think critically about how the game was presented and noted that the users were the ones who had overhyped the game. On these particular posts, users were quick to express their disagreement by pointing to *No Man's Sky* lack of transparency on numerous issues.

People complaining about being lied to by the dev? Such kids am I right? ("As if programming a game wasn't difficult enough, now you have to cope with millions of kids complaining at launch," 2016)

Why? Someone made a widget. They lied about the widget. People spent money on the widget based upon the lies. Who gives a shit why the liar lied? You sir are part of the problem. ("Bandwagon hate and the need for education of the development cycle," 2016)

He is not the spawn of Satan. I don't agree with throwing insults at him. He is, however, the co-founder of HG and should probably address the community based on what is currently happening with the product they sold people. ("Sean Murray is a person," 2016)

The thread with the most comments at 151, titled “Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund,” criticized individuals requesting a refund, echoing the previous Sony Developer’s Sahid Kamal Ahmad’s tweet that called users “thieves” for demanding a refund, though thievery for Ahmad was at 50 hours and not 72. Focusing on company actions, it did highlight the inappropriateness of *No Man’s Sky*’s public relations but replies to the OP indicated those users agreed that asking for refunds after 72 hours of gameplay was unethical.

If you returned it because it didn't work on your computer, or you played for a few hours and didn't think it was worth it, that's fine. But if you pay less than \$100 for something that you used for 72 hours, maybe you could let them keep your money. Asking for a

refund after 72 hours is greedy, and taking advantage of other people's kindness at best.
("Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund," 2016)

Ditto. I have more than 72 hours and the more I play and learn about the end and the Atlas path, the more I realize this game is not what I wanted or hoped for and I will almost certainly never play it again after I experience the end for myself, which I am actively jumping towards. But there have been some moments of fun, and even as they are tainted by the broader story and experience, I've gotten my money's worth. Anyone getting near 72 hours has, in my opinion, done the same. ("Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund," 2016)

Nah, 70 hours is too much. I can see 12, or maybe 16 or something, but once you get past 20 hours you know what you're getting. There's just not that much variety in the game past the 6-hour mark. ("Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund," 2016)

Though there were critiques about refund expectations, there were also comments that prompted discussion about the refund policy, particularly for the digital distribution platform Steam. According to many of the users who replied to the OP, Steam refuses to refund a game that has over two hours of play time. Many users, even if they agreed with the sentiment of the OP, argued that Steam's policies were unfair as two hours were too little to determine if the game was satisfactory for the consumer. Commenters argued that *No Man's Sky* exemplified the weakness

of the two-hour rule because of the design of the game as an open-world format, requiring more than two hours to sufficiently explore the game and decide on a game's level of satisfaction.

Yeah, most of the AAA games should have more than 5 hours. Most of them have longer loading times, longer tutorials, longer cutscenes and longer initial setup. You've pretty much used the 2 hours before even having properly played the game. ("Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund," 2016)

You're absolutely right, especially with this game. It takes more than two hours to begin to realize what the game is and, to be blunt, the many things it is not regardless of what Hello Games said it would be. To me that's why it makes sense for Steam to be so willing to make an exception on this game. ("Shame on anyone who played NMS for 72 hours, then got a refund," 2016)

It became clear that, while the users agreed that the game was a disappointment, there were consumers who were taking advantage of the company, and the previously cited user comments did not agree with the practice. These responses highlight that, despite negative feelings and even criticism of how the refund policies were conducted, consumers should also be held to certain expectations about the ethics of purchasing. It shows that consumers in the subreddit are critically thinking not only about the responsibilities of the company but also about the responsibilities of consumers. These sentiments differ from the narratives presented in Study Two when the professional trade journals presented the comments of gamers as being irrational

for demanding a refund. In those documents, journalists propagated the imagery of gamers being irrational when it comes to video game products and expectations.

However, it does not seem clear how the consumer is responsible for looking for the information. In one post entitled "Quotes for those who think that Sean is a liar," the user provides links and transcripts of quotations by Sean Murray about pieces of information that the user felt were deceptive. Of particular focus was the multiplayer capabilities of the game. Due to the open-world environment and the procedural generation of the game, consumers believed that this would be a massively multiplayer online (MMO) game. While the company did say that this would be a shared universe, it should not be a multiplayer game because the universe was so big that the chances of running into another player were impossible. To illustrate this argument, the OP links back to a quotation from Murray in the video game trade journal *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* as an example of downplaying features. When describing user inexperience with the development cycle, including the argument that Murray failed to reconcile that some features were to be less exciting than promised, when the game's release date neared, the company attempted to reduce and manage consumer expectations via transparency. Despite this, a user posted disagreement with the sentiment.

"really terrible multiplayer game." "not really a multiplayer game." "reasonably solitary." These are NOT phrases you should be using if there is NO multiplayer in your game. He should have said "There is absolutely no multiplayer in the game." and he didn't. That's the problem. ("Quotes for those who think that Sean is a liar," 2016)

I cannot believe the lack of logic the unapologetic fanboys are. They point to the OPs quotes as if that proves he never lied. How in the hell can people not acknowledge the other side of the coin, where he 100% lied? ("Quotes for those who think that Sean is a liar," 2016)

Finally, despite Sony being a significant investor in Hello Games, helping it go from an indie darling to a real AAA game, users were more focused on Hello Games as the perpetrator. One thread, attempting to defend Hello Games, discussed the possibility of Sony imposing limits on the game and suggested that Hello Games had little say in the development of features and the release date. Few users considered the possibility of Sony being the perpetrator and the two users who did argue that a majority of the blame for the game's failure lies with Hello Games.

We'll never learn what really happened, either if he was forced from Sony due to a contract, or he just wanted to throw away random promises to make everyone interested about his game, we'll never find out. ("TIL anybody that defends the game or HG is a fanboy and also that not many people understand what a lie is," 2016)

...lying is lying. he both straight-up lied and lied by omission. doesn't matter if Sony pulled the strings or not, and it's certainly impossible to argue that he isn't a liar, because the key characteristic of a liar is telling lies. ("TIL anybody that defends the game or HG is a fanboy and also that not many people understand what a lie is," 2016)

Defending Sony is a significant contrast to user reactions to publishers about *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017). Many of the complaints were directed at Electronic Arts, particularly in the perceived hypocrisy as a company. However, Sony's failure to receive chastening for publisher blame is unclear, but, since Sony does not own Hello Games, whereas Electronic Arts own BioWare, users found Hello Games to be more of an independent entity, and therefore, more culpable for the issues.

Moreover, it was Hello Games and Sean Murray promoting the game and promising features that did not make it into the initial release of the game, not Sony. Again, the critiques identified in Study Two of *No Man's Sky* (2016) differ from the user reactions in Study Three. While both groups acknowledged that Hello Games was a significant contributor to the misleading promotional material, the professional critiques believe that Sony may be part of the blame whereas the users did not hold Sony culpable. If this is true, then it is a benefit for a publisher like Sony but also a potential warning for indie developers interested in gaining an advantage by having an AAA publisher as an investor.

Star Wars Battlefront II

Posts and comments about r/StarWarsBattlefront primarily focused on conversations about consumers and actions but also had a second prevalent theme regarding monetary issues. The *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) subreddit more varied in its discussions about the game with conversations regarding public relations, technical and monetary issues, and, most significant to the game, microtransactions and loot boxes. Unlike the previous two subreddits, which analyzed ten different subreddits, one thread had to be discarded from the analysis because it did not fit into the original data range assigned by the researcher. The table below provides the title for each thread, and which had the most prevalent theme in the thread.

Table 7 Star Wars Battlefront II Reddit Themes

| <u>Thread Title</u> | <u>Most Prevalent Theme(s)</u> |
|---|---|
| Ungrateful comments like these are the reason we are not taken seriously | Public Relations & Marketing, Technical Features |
| The simplification of Battlefront, and why it is no longer "Battlefront" | Consumers & Actions |
| Why I'm not canceling my preorder | Monetary Value |
| Checking in with a few progression comments | Monetary Value |
| It's taken me 24hrs and 52mins to unlock all the locked Hero's, what about you guys? (Deluxe Trooper Edition) | Microtransactions & Loot Boxes |
| EA is issuing refunds | Consumer & Actions |
| Follow-up on progression | Consumers & Actions |
| THIS GAME WILL BE REMEMBERED AS A HALF BAKED MONEY GRAB. Thanks EA/DICE. | Consumers & Actions, Public Relations & Marketing |
| I am all for the return of microtransactions | Microtransactions & Loot Boxes, Monetary Value |

As explained in Study Two, the use of microtransactions was a major complaint by consumers and critics, who argued that these microtransactions were evident of the game and Electronic Arts becoming greedy and ignorant of consumer desires. Two posts specifically addressed the concept of microtransactions, but ironically, both of these posts either supported the concept or argued that the progression to unlock the heroes was not bad and did not require the microtransactions everyone complained about. The results were mixed in both posts. Some users agreed that it was not impossible from a practical standpoint to play the game without

microtransactions and proceeded to argue that many users on the subreddit who were complaining about the game lacked the abilities to progress.

24 hours to get all heroes is 100% feasible. I got 10k credits only playing multiplayer for about 5 hours tonight. Some of it was from challenges, but those 200-300 credits after every game rack up quick. ("It's taken me 24hrs and 52mins to unlock all the locked Hero's, what about you guys? (Deluxe Trooper Edition)," 2017)

Every person in this subreddit are the mouth breathers that infest the bottom echelons in the scoreboard of every single game they're in and cry when they can never be a hero because they're terrible. ("It's taken me 24hrs and 52mins to unlock all the locked Hero's, what about you guys? (Deluxe Trooper Edition)," 2017)

Other individuals were quick to comment that the feasibility of gaining all the heroes was due to users' legitimate complaints about the microtransactions. This caused prices to be lowered and made earning credits more manageable. However, users still retorted that patch or no patch, the progression was not terrible, and people who used microtransactions were paying because they were impatient or lacked gaming abilities.

Even before the update, it would've taken ~20 hours to unlock him. As I've said in other posts, I've spent more time than that unlocking weapons or paint schemes in CoD or Battlefield. The loot crates don't provide heroes, and the Starcards inside them can be unlocked by completing challenges or with in-game currency. Reddit is all worked up

over comments by people who have never played the game or researched actual game mechanics. ("It's taken me 24hrs and 52mins to unlock all the locked Hero's, what about you guys? (Deluxe Trooper Edition)," 2017)

In r/StarWarsBattlefront, there is a thread that holds the title of the most downvoted Reddit post in the platform's 13-year history. The OP was written by a developer of *Star Wars Battlefront II* who explained how the game progression was meant to work.

Speaking of earning credits, we're constantly evaluating and tweaking the earn rates versus the cost of crates and heroes. The current rates were based on open beta data, but you should expect us to constantly evolve these numbers as we hit launch and onwards. There will also be more milestones that award credits and crafting parts available, as well as star cards only unlockable through those milestones. If all you want to do is play and grind towards your next unlock that will be fully possible and we'll continue to tweak the numbers until the requirements feel fun and achievable. ("Checking in with a few progression comments," 2017)

In this particular thread, users were quick to point out their disappointment with the company's comments.

Community: We don't want to work 40 hours to unlock the best characters in a game we paid full price for. *Developers:* You want to grind endlessly for credits so you have

something to look forward to. In the words of a Hutt, "Your mind powers will not work on me, boy." ("Checking in with a few progression comments," 2017)

At this point, there seem to be two factions: one that thinks the progression is too hard, and one that thinks individuals are complaining. While the majority of the users on the subreddit are in the former category, there are enough users in the latter to create a distinct debate about progression and the use of microtransactions. Though Electronic Arts and the developer DICE backpedaled on the progression, it becomes clear in their follow-up post that they play into that debate in explaining how progression works.

The most important thing in terms of progression is that it's fun. No one wins if it's not. You play the game, you do your best and get rewarded based on your performance. You gain credits and spend them on whatever you want...These are the credit cost for all locked heroes at launch. These prices are based on a combination of open beta data, early access data and a bunch of other metrics. They're aimed to ensure all our players have something fun to play for as we launch the game, while at the same time not supposed to make you feel overwhelmed and frustrated. ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

Undoubtedly, the more ardent critics of Electronic Arts and microtransactions were not swayed by the comments from the representative but responded with sarcasm and *Star Wars* innuendo. However, during their particular post, users were much more descriptive in critiques, microtransactions, and the progression policy.

Stop this progression bullshit in shooters. It's not necessary. Shooters are not RPG's. We don't need RPG elements in multiplayer shooters. Instead, provide quality game types, engaging game types and all around engaging content and people will play your game and love it. And, eventually pay for DLC's. ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

As stated previously, DLCs are a way for companies to provide extra content for a particular game. Most DLCs require a monetary payment, and the user's comment highlights that games should rely more on DLCs if they want to make money rather than microtransactions. However, this only relies on whether the base game was positively received; otherwise, it is as seen as another "cash grab."

Worse yet, for the company's responses, many users believed that the progression was a conspiratorial move by Electronic Arts and DICE. By releasing a controversial progression system, knowing that gamers would complain about it, they would replace it with one that was less controversial to appease gamers. In reality, this is the system that they always wanted, and it was a trick to ease gamers into a full microtransaction system eventually.

The fact that they're touting this as good news just shows how off the mark EA are, the cost was only a quarter of the problem, it's still the bullshit hoops you have to jump through for a game people have paid their money for already. ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

It's good that they're making changes, but you're right. They knew exactly what they were doing in the first place. "I really appreciate the candid feedback" is just code for "We

were seeing how much we could fuck you over, and it backfired." ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

As we saw this coming do not give them the praise they do not deserve for trying to push this system out in the first place. Let your voices be heard to stop something like this from ever happening again! ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

Reducing specific pricing for certain heroes addresses one symptom of the actual problem, which is EA putting pay2win elements into a full priced game and designing a progression system which is designed primarily to push gambling real money for virtual rewards. ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

Without knowing the development cycle for a game, it is difficult to fathom whether a company could invest resources into creating a controversial aspect of the game, knowing that gamers would not like it while ensuring the playing mechanism that the company initially wanted. While Electronic Arts is one of the more financially stable companies in the video game industry, it did cost the company millions of dollars to deal with the issue, both in rectifying it developmentally and from a public relations perspective.

Another thread focused on the controversy surrounding Electronic Arts' lack of a refund button for pre-orders. While the critique in Study Two pointed out that there was never a refund button for pre-order games, it was still incredibly difficult for angry consumers to get their money back. One user went out of their way to get a refund of the game, and then posted a transcript of the conversation online to help others get a refund as well (EA issuing refunds,

2017). However, the post became quite controversial. Like *No Man's Sky* (2016), many users took offense that the user received a refund for the game after playing for 40 hours. Other users also criticized the demeanor the user had in the transcript. At one point, the user criticized the customer service agent for taking too long and wished Electronic Arts would speed up the process. In response, these users expressed times in which Electronic Arts was quick in giving refunds.

The dude was taking a pretty long time between replies but I'll eat crow on this and say it was pretty salty of me to say that. Especially, as it turns out the support ended up being very positive for me. I have no problem admitting I probably shouldn't have hit send on that line of text. ("EA is issuing refunds," 2017)

As much shit as EA gets (most of it is deserved), Origin support is actually really, really good. It's way better than Steam's customer support. Props to EA. ("EA is issuing refunds," 2017)

I had 2 support issues with EA on this game and both were dealt with quickly and to my satisfaction. I am really impressed by their call back option. ("EA is issuing refunds," 2017)

The comments in this thread seem to be a contradiction of what the critique in Study Two implied: that while the customer service could be awful, gamers were jumping to conclusions about the practices of EA. Based on the comments from the users, the consumers seem to have a

conventional understanding of the refund process, and, while acknowledging that it can be frustrating at times, it, overall, seemed to be a suitable process. It is not to say that there were not comments that expressed disgust about the customer service experience. One user lamented that Electronic Arts was not genuinely engaging in good customer service by doing the bare minimum, arguing: "Refunding a broken game [in] a prompt manner is not 'good' customer service, it's the fucking law" ("EA is issuing refunds," 2017). What constitutes "broken" is not discussed, and the original user post says their reason for refunding the game was because they were dissatisfied with the product not that there was a technical glitch. Another user also suggested that Electronic Arts deserved the pushback and consumers should stand firm about the refund process, stating, "Ethical lines are crossed by EA all the time but you're against this? Ahahahaha, that's a good joke mate" ("EA is issuing refunds," 2017).

While these comments are in the minority, not only in this thread but in the other threads, these are the comments that stand out to outsiders and are good fodder for the stereotype of the irrational gamer (regardless of how many other "rational" comments took place within the same conversation). In one particular thread, gamers responded to the critiques that they were complaining too much about the game and its microtransactions.

I only bought this game so I could play as Anakin, Obi, Greivous and Vader. When I saw the very first trailer with Yoda and Darth Maul I didn't realise they would be the only prequel heroes 6 MONTHS after the games release! ("Ungrateful comments like these are the reason we are not taken seriously," 2017)

The user points out the lack of transparency from video game trailers, similar to complaints regarding *No Man's Sky*. Many users seemed to agree with this sentiment, expressing the reasons why they bought the game in the first place. One user took the conversation a step further, veering away from complaining about the company to critiquing the community. Moving forward, unlike the discussions for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *No Man's Sky* (2016), users on the Reddit forum argued about whether Electronic Arts was trying to appeal to casual or more avid gamers. The results were mixed.

There's nothing to be "grateful" for. EA didn't drive up to his house and gift him a game in a diamond-encrusted case. Guy bought a product he wasn't happy with. It's not his or anyone else's job to sing the praises of something he doesn't feel the need to do so for. We aren't taken seriously because a bunch of people act like trained seals that sit up and clap for mediocrity and bare-minimums being treated like giant steps forward. ("Ungrateful comments like these are the reason we are not taken seriously," 2017)

Another user argued that Electronic Arts was trying to appeal to the casual gamers, who were more likely to spend money on microtransactions as they were not used to waiting or working through the progression like the more avid gamers.

The only people left playing are SW enthusiasts like you and me. That's it. The "casual crowd" they were trying to capture literally told EA/DICE to fuck right the hell off when they saw that it was an empty game at launch, and shallow as fuck. ("This game will be remembered as a half baked money grab. Thanks EA/DICE," 2017)

Yep. It's now blindingly obvious that EA refuses to even give the slightest bit of ground to keep the fans happy. They are purely just aiming for the more casual whales that won't realise how fucked this game is until they're already hooked. ("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

Comments like these are a compelling critique of the video game culture itself and how users may identify themselves and others. In both comments, the users blamed the other group for the problems of *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) by arguing that if other gamers continued to buy the game or purchase credits, the gaming community as a whole could not afford to push back against companies like Electronic Arts effectively. Unfortunately, these conversations did not get very far and turned back to complaining about Electronic Arts, so while they were interesting, they are not treated as significant points of conversation.

Discussion

Study Three sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are consumer conversations about three negatively reviewed games enacted on Reddit forums?

RQ2: How do consumer to consumer conversations on Reddit in Study Three compare to journalists' representations in Study Two?

Similar to Study Two, in answering RQ1 a macro analysis determined that the most prevalent themes for each game were for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), consumers and actions, for *No Man's Sky* (2016), the most common theme was company and industry, and finally, for *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), two themes were common in the conversations: consumer actions and

monetary value. For a more in-depth analysis of the conversations on the subreddits, the most prevalent theme of all ten threads for each subreddit was analyzed, and each thread was also analyzed to determine its most common theme. Finally, the researcher went even deeper into the texts of the conversations themselves to illustrate how issues were communicated and connected to the negatively-reviewed video games.

With RQ2, the results of Study Three produced interesting insights about the types of conversations gamers are having with other gamers, going against some of the comments in the journalistic critiques from Study Two but also contradicting assumptions made by the researcher. When analyzing the comments from r/NoMansSky, the researcher's initial assumptions would have been that the replies would be antagonistic to the OP, suggesting that, as consumers of the game, they had a right to determine whether they could request a refund. Instead, gamers who thought they deserved refunds were quickly chastised by others as being too greedy, barring that their reason for a refund was for technical issues. The continued conversations about Steam's refund policy showed that consumers were conducting their due diligence in understanding the policies and practices with a company. Gamers showed they were upset about the policy not because they did not read it, but that they thought the policy was problematic and potentially reductive. Moreover, they provided feedback on what they believe would be a reasonable policy, passing the responsibility back to the companies to make a choice.

However, though the gamers are providing explanations and feedback, it does not mean their responses are practical or rational. For those outside of the video game community, demanding a refund for an entertainment item is considered unreasonable, again barring that the issue was not a faulty product. It would be inappropriate for individuals to sit through a two-hour movie they did not like and demand that the theater gives their money back. Why should the

company be forced to provide a full refund because the consumer did not like the game after two hours?

Questions like these cannot be answered from the analysis, but they inspire some discussions of how we view entertainment goods, the propagation of digital distribution, and how both of these can affect policies surrounding ownership and intellectual property. Research on participatory fandom and culture industry has explored these discussions about the role of media, and video game communities, in particular, the research provided case studies for these conversations whether it be in resisting or accepting industry practices (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

While the gaming communities had different comments and critiques for each of the games, there was a common belief amongst the users that the problems are not unique to these games. The problems exist because the AAA industry is failing to listen to its consumers and is focused on its bottom line.

Regarding your main point, objectively, it is always outrageous and sickening that AAA publishers continue to get away with shipping unfinished games at full price. Not only to the publishers continue to have the gall to do so, there are enough gamers that put up with it and still buy on day one, or even pre-order. This problem is obviously not limited to ME:A, but still. There is your first hate target. ("10 Reasons to Be Excited for Mass Effect: Andromeda," 2017)

It's a predictable and dishonest pattern of events that accompanies every big release nowadays.

1. devs and media hype a new game to hell and back
2. game releases, it's broken, incomplete, severely lacking, etc.
3. people rightly complain about being misled
4. a few people take it too far, or they just want to troll
5. devs and media pounce on the small handful of over-the-top comments to paint the entire customer base as entitled, abusive, etc., with bonus points for any sexism/racism/homophobia/etc.
6. crisis averted! except for the part where the audience grows ever more distrustful of publishers, media, devs... and the part where the wholly justified blow-back gets bigger every time... ("As if programming a game wasn't difficult enough, now you have to cope with millions of kids complaining at launch," 2016)

This is entirely not your fault. I sincerely believe that you are a good guy, and actually want to bring forward the game and make it as good as possible, but you have to understand that we as consumers were screwed over so many times by big publisher (and EA in particular) for an extra shekel or two that we feel like we cannot trust a word that comes out of the mouth of an official representative of one of them without considering it PR speech at first. :(("Follow-up on progression," 2017)

Even when a company puts out a notice that it is fixing a problem, it is seen as merely a PR move, leaving gamers unsatisfied because it repeats a corporate cycle to which they have, unfortunately, become accustomed.

Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to consider for Study Three; the first is that, in analyzing the subreddits, only the total comments were analyzed for each thread and not the number of users who participated in the thread. Users can leave multiple comments for the same thread whether it is a reply to the original post, a reply to another comment, or even a reply to a comment the user made. Therefore, while a thread may seem to be highly active regarding the number of comments, only a small number of users may be interacting with that thread. A future research study should explore not only the comments in a particular thread but the variance of users within the thread. This type of analysis could provide a much more detailed and accurate understanding of what types of conversations and issues are most important to the community.

The second limitation is that the data set was delimited by the three subreddits related to the three video games. Choosing which subreddits to be analyzed assumed that if a user were looking for a subreddit on that particular game, the chosen subreddit would be the first stop. Moreover, when conducting a Google search about the game and including the keyword “Reddit,” these subreddits are the top hits. However, any user can create a subreddit for conversations, and even if the subreddit is not about a specific game, conversations about video games may take part in any community. Therefore, future research should expand beyond the original subreddit communities presented in this dissertation to facilitate an extended picture of what topics are most important to the video game community.

The third limitation is that the researcher was limited by the skill set when importing the data from Reddit. Through study, the researcher learned of a Google Sheets function that could import the RSS feed of a Reddit thread into a document, which could then be imported into NVivo. However, the RSS feed can only grab the top 200 comments in a thread, meaning that,

for some of the threads, comments were unfortunately left off the analysis. There are many other ways to import Reddit comments and other forms of data through data mining, which require a skill set that the researcher currently does not have or could not afford to hire. Learning this skill set will help future research on this topic greatly because it will allow the researcher to explore different avenues of video game community conversations and will not be limited by other coding functions.

Finally, other areas of future research would explore the role of trolling when it comes to Reddit comments. Comments that were not substantive or clear cases of “trolling” were deleted from the analysis; however, even controlling for trolling, not all comments are created equal concerning engagement. Future studies should explore how comments encourage or discourage engagement as well as how companies can choose which comments to consider when responding to feedback. Research studies like this would be relevant in cases like the two *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) threads where the organizational representative responded ("Checking in with a few progression comments," 2017; "Follow-up on progression," 2017). While there were many comments on those threads, not all of them were useful for company improvement. Therefore, a final research study should explore how companies pick and choose to which comments they should respond.

Conclusion

When looking from the outside into the community, it seems that gamers are cynical at best and ungrateful at worst. For a minority group of gamers, this assumption is correct. However, in reviewing and analyzing the three subreddits, we also see gamers engage with one another with specific instances and complaints. These same gamers also recognize the limitations of their thinking and biases, such as understanding the development cycle or

expecting too much from video game developers and publishers. While there are community policing and gatekeeping of opinions, users are not afraid to stand up against these community expectations and can engage in a reasonable debate that provides a more credible context for why good games go bad.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Over the past 50 years, video games have evolved in several ways, transforming into a global multi-billion dollar industry (Donovan, 2010). Despite the industry's high and lows, the industry has managed to become a mainstay of cultural history (Kane, 2008). From an academic perspective, the continuation of the video game industry and the video game culture is primarily due to the men and women of all ages, the “freaks” and the “geeks,” who continue to purchase these games, talk about games with friends, and create communities, which are now becoming more mainstream (Shaw, 2010; D. Williams, 2003, 2006). However, video game culture is also still described as “different” from other consumer industries by outside groups, in particular journalists, even when their descriptions of gamer culture are favorable (Shaw, 2010).

The studies that comprise this dissertation were inspired by theory and practice that proclaim engagement is a desirable and profitable communication practice. Though engagement has become a popular buzzword in a number of disciplines that see value in cultivating mutually-beneficial relationships, the concept of engagement has been operationalized in a myriad of ways, ranging from simple one-way communication designed to influence others' behaviors to two-way, dialogic communication, designed to facilitate understanding of and appreciation for the values and interests of the other (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The fact that engagement has been conceptualized as well as operationalized in different ways is symptomatic of its moorings in different academic traditions as well as its commodification into a profitable and/or ethical

business practice. As such engagement has come to mean different things to different audiences within different contexts. (Laroche et al., 2013)

This dissertation focuses on engagement practices by the video game industry, specifically AAA publishers, and the consumers of video games. Thus, the approach evidenced in this dissertation is more consumer-focused and pragmatic rather than philosophical, meaning that the studies are grounded in theory and research on strategic communication, including marketing, public relations, and consumer behavior. Engagement is positioned as a communication practice that helps organizations and individuals achieve their goals within the context of the relationship. Though engagement between organizations and consumers (B2C) has generated research, the engagement between consumers (C2C) is relatively understudied. Additionally, there is a lack of research that permits comparisons between B2C and C2C engagement.

Through the three studies, the dissertation offers insights into engagement practices associated with the video game industry and demonstrates the value of using multiple sources of data and methods of analysis to understand how publisher-initiated engagement can be understood from the perspectives of expert journalists (ostensibly the outsider perspective) as well as from the perspectives of consumers. Moreover, the analysis was enriched through the examination of an often-neglected dimension of engagement that of consumer-to-consumer engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010) as well as how the contents of conversations surrounding their experiences can provide companies with information about real and perceived expectation gaps, valuable form of consumer feedback. By going to where conversations are taking place rather than requiring consumers to respond to company platforms, companies can strengthen the organization-consumer relationship and can respond appropriately to consumer concerns while

also making consumers feel respected and appreciated. C2C conversations on platforms like Reddit, Discord, or user-moderated forums provide a useful starting point for understanding consumer reactions to engagement. These actions can strengthen brand loyalty and identity, which translates into value for a company (Kumar & Pansari, 2016).

A reason for the selecting the video game industry, specifically AAA publishers, as the context for this investigation was the portrayals of video game consumers as an active consumer population. At times gamers are depicted as quick to express dissatisfaction with products and services. They have been described as aggressive, demanding, and irrational with their claims and expectations (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Gentile, 2015; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Their vocal product and service-related protests have had coverage in mainstream media. However, academic articles in game studies often try to share the gamer's side of the story, presenting them as passionate advocates for the industry (Shaw, 2010).

Overview of Study One

To explore the subjective experiences of video game consumers, Study One focused on the self-reports of video game consumers' expectations for perceived and actual experiences of engagement with both AAA publishers and other consumers. This study was designed to provide insights into respondents' actual or anticipated B2C, C2B, and C2C engagement activities.

The study sought to prioritize the perspectives of video game consumers by allowing participants to self-identify their own “gamer type” rather than imposing a gamer type label based on demographics, purchase behaviors, and other factors commonly used in marketing research. Because consumers differ with how they think of themselves relative to their use of products and services, self-identified consumer labels provided the foundation for dividing

respondents into three consumers groups with varying degrees of identification with the video game industry's products. The participants reported self-identifications by selecting a point on a sliding scale that they believed corresponded with their own gamer identities. The labels of casual, average, and hardcore were anchored on the sliding scale.

Study One explored the respondents' engagement behaviors they initiate with publishers as well as with other consumers. Consumers' interest in initiating engagement with publishers and other consumers may vary according to their gamer identities. In this way, a range of behaviors was operationalized as engagement, including more scholarly characterizations of desirable engagement practices (e.g., authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness), consumer-centered reasons for and methods of initiating engagement with publishers, and the reasons for and likelihood of engaging with other consumers regarding negative experiences with video games and publishers. The study sought answers to questions concerning perceptions of issues related to AAA video game publishers, characteristics of communication valued by consumers, and consumers' perceptions of engagement. This approach required the use of several existing measures as well as measures developed for the specific purposes of this project. Because engagement can be studied from the perspective of multiple disciplines, the survey incorporated measures developed from both communication and management research. The hypotheses and research questions for Study One are reported below. Results of the hypothesis-testing are reported.

H1a: A monotonic relationship exists between playing video games non-professionally and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Supported)

H1b: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends in person about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

H1c: A monotonic relationship exists between talking with friends online about games and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

(Supported)

H1d: A monotonic relationship exists between participating in official video game forums and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Partially Supported)

H1e: A monotonic relationship exists between discussing video games on social media and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore).

(Partially Supported)

H1f: A monotonic relationship exists between watching Let's Plays and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Partially Supported)

H1g: A monotonic relationship exists between watching professional video game competitions and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Supported)

H2: A monotonic relationship exists between the amount of disposable income spent on video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Supported)

H3: A monotonic relationship exists between the likelihood of pre-ordering video game products and services and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Supported)

H4: A monotonic relationship exists between met wants and needs from video game publishers and the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore). (Partially Supported)

H5: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with publishers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher. (Supported)

H6: A monotonic relationship exists between the frequency of contact with other consumers to communicate a concern over a product or service and the three types of video game consumers' (casual, average, and hardcore) contact with a video game publisher. (Supported)

The first set of research questions explored how participants observed characteristics of engagement, as well as how they perceived specific engagement practices of video game publishers.

RQ1: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of the importance of communication characteristics commonly associated with engagement practices (e.g., authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) with AAA video game publishers?

RQ2: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in their perceptions of specific engagement practices of AAA video game publishers?

The results for both the general engagement concepts (authenticity, transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness) (RQ1) and the more specific operationalizations of the

engagement concepts (RQ2) indicated that average and hardcore gamers, compared to casual gamers, viewed these engagement concepts, as they relate to communication with AAA video game publishers, as more important. The results for the extended operationalizations of authenticity and transparency assessed perceptions of the frequency with which publishers were meeting expectations; however, for the operationalizations of legitimacy and responsiveness, there was no difference between any of the groups

To assess consumer engagement of participants, RQ3 asked, “**Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) differ in enacting consumer engagement behaviors?**” Three different types of consumer engagement were assessed: consumer lifetime value (CLV), consumer influence value (CIV), and consumer knowledge value (CKV). Except for consumer lifetime value (CLV), for which hardcore gamers did not differ significantly from average gamers, the patterns of mean ranks demonstrated that hardcore gamers were most likely to report participating in other forms of consumer engagement (CIV and CKV), while casual gamers were least likely to report performing the behaviors.

RQ4 explored whether the three gamer groups held significantly different attitudes regarding AAA video game publishers. The research question is as follows:

RQ4: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in attitudes toward AAA video game publishers?

For attitudes toward businesses, casual, average, and hardcore gamers did not differ significantly in their attitudes regarding AAA video game publishers.

The series of RQ5 questions answered how the participants enacted different types of complaining and vindictive behaviors. Participants were asked to report if they engaged in behaviors against video game publishers, as well as with other consumers.

RQ5a: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in problem-solving complaining behaviors enacted against a AAA video game publisher?

RQ5b: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in vindictive complaining/retaliatory behaviors enacted against a AAA video game publisher?

RQ5c: Do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in complaining behaviors enacted with other video game consumers?

The results indicated that casual gamers might not be invested enough in video games to attempt to engage with a publisher to solve a problem, whereas average and hardcore gamers may be willing to attempt engagement because they make more considerable investments (RQ5a). For RQ5b, gamer types did not differ in the type of vindictive complaining that AAA publishers might experience from gamers. Finally, average and hardcore gamers may be more likely to be immersed in a community of gamers to whom they can complain, thus making it easier to share complaints about publishers compared to casual gamers (RQ5c).

Finally, for RQ6, participants were asked to report on a range of retaliatory actions, ranging from passive to active whether they would perform these actions. The actions also varied regarding legality.

RQ6: How do the three types of video game consumers (casual, average, and hardcore) gamers differ in enacting retaliatory behaviors against a AAA video game publisher?

Of the nine variables, "Refuse to buy products" was the only retaliatory behavior that gamers consistently acknowledged they would implement. For this variable, significant differences were

found between casual and average gamers as well as between casual and hardcore gamers. All other retaliatory behaviors showed mixed results; however, there were significant outliers which may have distorted the outcomes of the items.

Overview of Study Two

For Study Two, a qualitative analysis was performed to examine textual evidence of business-to-consumer (B2C) engagement behaviors as well as consumer-to-consumer (C2C) engagement behaviors. The study explored cases in which AAA publishers experienced backlash from consumers regarding a game that was promoted extensively by a company and was regarded by consumers to potentially be an excellent video game.

Because engagement is especially likely to stem from unmet expectations (e.g., complaints regarding products and services), three poorly-received video games provided the backdrop for the analysis. The selection of the "bad" video games was based upon their prominence in reports of "failed" game launches. Though the poorly-reviewed games had been heavily promoted by the publishers (a one-way form of engagement) and were eagerly anticipated by consumers, the promotional materials and actions associated with the launch of the games were criticized for overhyping and perhaps misleading consumers. Journalists critiqued these mismatches between expectations and reality. Reports of consumer complaints (unmet expectations), as described by journalists, were selected for analysis. Journalists' commentary on the B2C, C2B, and C2C engagement concerning these three games were used.

Using several types of queries in the program NVivo, which were used to help inform the results and did not yield the results themselves, Study Two goes beyond the crosstab queries through an in-depth analysis of the textual evidence to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How is engagement enacted in the publisher promotional materials of three negatively viewed video games by consumers?

RQ2: How do journalists represent consumer concerns regarding three negatively reviewed games?

RQ3: How are publisher reactions to consumer criticism portrayed in journalistic critiques?

Based on the results of the crosstab query, the most dominant theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) promotional material was public relations & marketing. For the *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material, two themes were prevalent: information collection and technical features. For the *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional material, company & industry was the most dominant theme. For critiques, the most prevalent theme in the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) critiques was technical features. For the *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) promotional material, the most prevalent theme was public relations & marketing. Finally, for the *No Man's Sky* (2016) promotional material, two themes emerged: company & industry and public relations & marketing.

The results from Study Two showed that companies are capable of providing specific information about the company and products but do engage in differing strategies regarding how the information is presented. It is clear that the information is well-presented and that it is concise regarding expectations; however, similar to the comments presented in the journalist critiques, when criticism was launched against a company, it was more detailed and often warranted citing the promotional material.

Overview of Study Three

Study Three adopted an alternative approach to studying engagement by examining consumer conversations (C2C) related to the aforementioned negatively reviewed games. The researcher explored user discussions and experiences through three forums on the social media platform Reddit that were related to each of the game case studies. The contents of the Reddit conversations were examined to understand the nature and topics of this C2C engagement better. The following research questions were answered:

RQ1: How are consumer conversations about three negatively reviewed gamers enacted on Reddit forums?

RQ2: How do consumer-to-consumer conversations on Reddit in Study Three compare to journalists' representations in Study Two?

While this crosstab query was used to help inform the results between the three subreddits, there was also a strong focus on the impact of each thread to understand the complexity of the conversations. For the ten threads analyzed for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), the dominant topics of the conversations were consumers and actions. For *No Man's Sky* (2016), the dominant theme was company & industry. For *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), two themes were prevalent in the conversations: consumer actions and monetary value. While the most prevalent theme of all ten threads for each subreddit was analyzed, each thread was also analyzed to determine its most common theme.

The results of Study Three produced interesting insights into the types of conversations gamers have with other gamers, which contradicted some of the comments from the journalistic critiques in Study Two but also the preconceived assumptions of the researcher. Moreover, while the gaming communities made different comments and critiques for each of the games, there was

a common belief that the problems are not unique to these games. The problems are believed to exist because the AAA industry is failing to listen to its consumers and is focused on its bottom line.

Overall, these three studies work together to contribute to engagement theory by helping researchers and practitioners alike understand how a perceived active consumer group, such as the video game group, implements engagement with businesses and other consumers. One disadvantage of engagement theory is the inconsistency of a precise definition, not just between scholars and practitioners but within these gamer consumer groups as well. A lack of a consistent definition makes researching engagement theory difficult and results in resorting to theories about what it “looks like” (e.g., dialogic or relational perspectives) rather than its definition (Heath, 2014; K. A. Johnston, 2018; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Willis, 2012). Therefore, when comparing the results of the dissertation, the focus should always be on the implementation of engagement or the lack thereof rather than adhering to a definition.

Overall Implications

Most of the results reaffirmed previous research by scholars of consumer engagement; it is particularly noteworthy that consumers are not that interested in engaging with or being engaged by businesses (Hibbard et al., 2001; Lalmas, O'Brien, & Yom-Tov, 2014; Smith & Taylor, 2017); however, the results of the dissertation also extend engagement theory by expanding on how companies can improve consumer engagement. Therefore, the dissertation yielded multiple implications.

The Role of Identity in Engagement Theory

The first implication involves how gamers identities are perceived regarding their consumer engagement. Despite being previously portrayed by outsiders as overzealous

consumers continually berating the video game industry, the research yielded results that indicated that gamers are no more interested in engaging with businesses compared with other types of consumers (Huefner & Hunt, 2000; Smith & Taylor, 2017). While Study One indicated that hardcore gamers were more likely to engage compared with their casual and average peers, this group would still prefer to communicate with their fellow consumers instead. Even for retaliatory behavior, only a small number of participants acknowledged that they would engage in highly aggressive, illegal behaviors.

In connection with engagement theory, the dissertation explored the role of identity when it came to video game consumers engaging with other publishers and one another. Identity plays an integral role in brand loyalty, especially when large groups of individuals can come together to talk about the hobbies they enjoy (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013); however, the perceived passion of video game consumers can also be the very reason they are maligned and otherized by outside groups. Their identity becomes the issue, especially when consumers do begin to attack the industry that created the products and brands.

While the focus on identity was most prevalent in Study One, the results helped to inform Studies Two and Three on how the most "engaged" groups of gamers from the survey, the average, and hardcore gamers, are communicating concerns and spreading information. More specifically in Study Three, the results showed how community members disciplined others regarding incorrect information that was being communicated in the forum.

Study Two considers how video game publishers and journalists' critiques may cater to one gamer identity over another. One assumes that the promotional material should attempt to cater to as many consumers as possible, and that may be why Electronic Arts' promotional material was vague. *No Man's Sky* (2016), however, was working to cultivate an audience and

most indie players range in that average to the hardcore spectrum (Lipkin, 2013). There may be more pressure to engage hardcore gamers as a segmented group because organizations assume they are a group which wants information, compared to casual gamers who may not actively seek the information. Therefore, future research should explore organizational decisions on crafting promotional material as a way to engage different segments of video game consumers.

Journalists are catering to mostly average and hardcore gamers as they are the ones most likely to seek out information and read their articles. However, even mainstream publications like *Forbes* includes articles about video games, though it may frame and convey information differently than say an article from the video game trade journals *Kotaku* or *Polygon*. Therefore, another future direction for research would be the exploration of how different publications may differ in portrayals of gamers (primarily gaming vs. non-gaming).

In Study Three, the texts cannot capture information regarding the social identity and self-categorization within these specific video game communities. Part of this is because users on Reddit can remain anonymous, as well as have multiple usernames. If a user is critiqued or maligned within a group, it is easy to craft a new identity to participate in the conversation again, as a different person, at least perceived by the other community members. However, a username in itself can exhibit influence and power over a group. In the text comments themselves, there were no “direct” references of who was the most “influential” in the conversation. There were many moments where people chided or agreed with others, but there did not seem to be any attempts at posturing to gain social status.

Insights like these go into questions about how identity is perceived when going into forums like Reddit where anonymity plays a role in the conversations. With self-categorization,

the identity is from the crowd, however, for video game consumers, the perception is on themselves, which is what the researchers wanted to privilege.

Therefore, a future direction for video game consumer engagement is to explore these perceptions of identity further, namely not only how they perceive themselves, but how they think other gamers might perceive them. This future direction can further explain how identity is shaped based on lots of different factors including the genre of games, frequency, gender, age, race, lots of different ways to experience identity.

A second question is how does identity affect the conversations that take place in forums like Reddit? Unfortunately, Study Three did not assess the Reddit comments based on identity, looking at the textual comments rather than at which users were writing the comments.

However, a status symbol on Reddit can be based on the upvotes a comment receives.

Comments that are rated higher are automatically sorted to the top to be the most viewed. When using the Google Sheets function to export the comments as part of the data collection, the ones that were used for analysis could be considered higher-status comments.

Moreover, the active audience theory also applies because since Reddit users can vote on which comments are good or bad, they are manipulating the information for their consumer group. On Reddit, there is no way to determine if someone upvoted or downvoted a piece of information but only records the user comment. Therefore, there is no status gain or loss when giving an opinion.

Reddit acts as a more accurate platform for consumer engagement than previous articles. By giving consumers a safe space to provide opinions, they may be more confident to vote on either how they feel or what they want to say with little risk to losing status (though not being

able to gain status either). Rather than cultivating the perception of the whole group, Reddit and other social media platforms can provide a bit more nuance in segmented consumer opinions.

Nevertheless, at least for researchers and practitioners, the results highlight the importance of furthering the understanding the identity of consumer groups beyond psychographics, behavioral segmentation, or in-game demographics. While these may be useful factors in creating consumer profiles, they are only a small part of the equation in understanding what consumer engagement is and how consumers enact engagement.

The Role of Consumer Controlled Engagement Platforms

Next, it is necessary for companies not to rely on their engagement platforms and procedures but to observe the consumers' conversations on the major platforms where these conversations take place. With social media, companies have taken advantage of the opportunity to target consumers directly in a cost-effective manner through the tracking of metrics; however, when evaluating consumer engagement, companies either rely on customers using company platforms to deliver feedback or only evaluate consumer engagement for an advertising campaign to determine whether it was successful. Previous research has also adopted this approach when studying engagement, especially at the social media level, asking participants whether they reacted positively, negatively, or were neutral to an engagement stimulus (Colleoni, 2010; DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008).

Based on the results of the dissertation, it is asserted that companies should no longer rely on their tools and platforms to evaluate consumer engagement but should actively seek conversations and should observe responses regardless of their content or accuracy. With the use of market research technology and data mining, it is convenient to collect and to observe data in a conversational context, whereby companies can note consumers' perceptions of the company

overall rather than how they react to attempts at engagement. While Twitter and Facebook may be the most popular platforms for companies to observe consumer engagement, they are by no means the most efficient sources. Reddit, unofficial forums and chatrooms, and many other social media platforms that may not be as well-represented in the public media sphere are excellent sources to review responses and engagement, although a company should conduct sufficient research to identify where their consumers are having these conversations.

Consider the video game community, which is the focus group of this dissertation. In Study Two, the researcher explored how a company implemented engagement through promotional material and then how journalists implemented engagement on behalf of gamers to demonstrate the reasons for their dissatisfaction. Research such as that performed for Study Two is a conventional way to observe consumer engagement with a stimulus and a cultivated reaction of the specific stimulus (see Reitz, 2012; Rohm, Milne, & Kaltcheva, 2012; Tsai & Men, 2013). However, when researching the conversations on Reddit during Study Three, the results showed that many of the claims made by journalists were incorrect or misinterpreted compared to how gamers perceived the issues for the three games. However, companies may still rely on journalists' critiques for feedback because the articles provide enough information to "learn" from its mistakes but not enough to cause a company to leave its comfort zone to make changes. If companies are more interested in engaging with consumers than journalists, companies should place more weight on the comments presented in Study Three than the critiques presented in Study Two.

Putting more weight onto consumer comments is not just relegated to video game culture. Gamers, and by extension media fandom, are no longer the only groups using technology to engage with one another to communicate their concerns and issues (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Car

aficionados, makeup enthusiasts, DIY crafters, and many other groups have found platforms online to share their favorite products and tips while also spreading negative WOM if a company has not met consumer expectations. This dissertation demonstrates that other companies can refer to the video game community to help forecast how these conversations can evolve with their consumer and product base. Consequently, companies can commit to making sense of specific consumer issues and complaints that do not arise from crises in their business practices or from faulty products.

A recent example of an issue that occurred outside the video game industry was in June 2018, when make-up mogul Kat Von D announced her decision not to vaccinate her child. Makeup fans expressed their outrage through social media, stating they would no longer buy her products (Cooper, 2018). While many of these comments were featured on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, criticism of Kat Von D also took place on the Reddit forum r/MakeUpAddiction, which boasts over 722k subscribers. In the case of Kat Von D cosmetics, the outrage was not related to the products themselves or even to the business practices of the company, but instead, it was moral outrage at the personal decision of the company's head. While this may also be viewed as “irrational” behavior by consumers, as Kat Von D's decision does not affect the company or its products, the comments caused Kat Von D to backtrack on some of her comments.

As more groups come together on platforms and websites of their own creation, companies will have less control over the information provided; however, they will also have more opportunities to observe real conversations from consumers. Opportunities to view real conversations should be a boon for companies, no longer requiring the wasting of time and resources constructing and running platforms to gather feedback. Instead, their focus can

genuinely be listening to consumer concerns and adjusting what can be fixed to the best of their abilities.

Such a change is not without critique. Critical theorists argue that under a capitalistic model, companies are not interested in appealing to all consumers (Althusser, 2014). Instead, companies would instead choose their consumers, ones that are malleable and loyal to their mission and are willing to pay the company. Pro-capitalists would argue that this is merely a process of creating consumer profiles, which is necessary to sustain a company by targeting the customers who will best respond (Chao & Rajendran, 1993; M. Hernandez et al., 2013). Regardless, the consensus is that companies do not have an incentive to target all consumers, whether it be to maintain power or to maintain resources. Therefore, what incentive is there for companies to forgo their consumer engagement platforms and to venture into the wild terrain that is consumer-created communities? There is a pure and simple answer that both capitalists and Marxists can agree with: survival.

For a company to survive, it must know when to pivot and meet the trends that either the culture industry is proposing, per the theories of Horkheimer et al. (2002), or that consumers are undertaking and creating, per the arguments of participatory fandom (Hinck, 2019; Jenkins, 2006). Former company giants, such as Kodak, Blockbuster, and Pan Am, all of which comfortably held the top places of their industries for a time, eventually failed because they were unable to evolve their products. Unlike Kodak, Blockbuster, and Pan Am, today's companies can now manage issues, crises, and pivots before they occur much more efficiently by exploring consumer conversation where they are taking place. To do so, they must be willing to acquiesce to the way consumers prefer to communicate rather than through a forced company system. Both

groups want to receive value and to be valued. Exploring these conversations is a step toward achieving this balance.

AAA publishers, such as Electronic Arts, are still leaders in creating games and making sales, even when consumers complain about their business practices. However, due to game distribution platforms, such as Steam, and the backing of companies, such as Sony Interactive Entertainment and Microsoft, independently-developed games (i.e., indies) are now becoming more popular and more successful than their AAA counterparts. ConcernedApe's *Stardew Valley* (2016) does not feature complex graphics or an action-packed storyline. Instead, the protagonist is a farmer who spends days clearing land, cultivating crops, raising animals, and mining rocks. By the end of 2017, relying only on WOM and game ratings, it sold 3.5 million copies (Chan, 2018), with more consumers buying the game every day. Moreover, the game only costs USD 15 and rates much higher than either *No Man's Sky* (2016), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), or *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017), which cost USD 60 each.

While AAA companies such as Electronic Arts may presently feel comfortable at the top of the industry, there is no doubt they will be required to begin competing with these new, smaller companies because these companies are beginning to develop games with a higher appeal to the current consumer trends and interests. As illustrated by Study Three, consumers are well aware of this coming change and are welcoming it with open arms because it might mean that AAA companies will take notice. AAA publishers might take heed and observe these conversations rather than control the conversations to conserve resources more efficiently and to spend resources to maintain the profitability of their companies.

How Consumers Perceive and Report Information

Finally, it is important to note that consumers are now much more informed, and they are capable of finding the information that companies have devoted considerable efforts to controlling because of increased access to the Internet. Now, consumers can learn about a crisis or issue before the representatives of a company are aware of a crisis. For technologically savvy gamers, information is currency well-spent in attracting more consumers to contest a company's bad practice.

Since as early as 2001, researchers have acknowledged the role that the Internet can play in better understanding consumers, mainly by searching community forums (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Pitta & Fowler, 2005; Schindler & Bickart, 2005) that were either created on a separate website platform or were cultivated on websites such as Yahoo! Groups. Social media websites may have helped to circumvent this research in part because it limited the types of conversations that could be held. For a microblogging platform such as Twitter, it is much easier to tweet and retweet statements than to participate in a conversation, which the platform was not designed to do (Watkins, 2017). While this might make sharing information much more accessible, companies could still control conversations because the platforms were not designed to encourage inquiry. Although information spreads, a company can still deny issues or direct the conversation elsewhere. As was shown when comparing the results of Study Two and Study Three, sometimes misdirection was effective when the complaints were detailed by journalists, even if they were critical of the companies.

As platforms similar to Reddit become more popular with the mainstream Internet public, as it has done within the last couple of years (Robinson, 2018), it seems that consumers are returning to engaging in conversations through forums, which provides opportunities for critical

thinking and inquiry. This trend represents a concern for many companies because they can no longer control information or conversations; however, it also means they have an opportunity to analyze and to identify the most important issues and concerns to consumers, some of which might even be resolvable. Moreover, companies might be able to understand a consumer complaint better when it evolves through conversation rather than as a tweet to the Customer Service Twitter account.

For Study Two, journalists explained that gamers were dissatisfied that they could not obtain a refund, and it was interpreted to mean that even after playing for many hours, gamers still expected a full refund. Refunds are never beneficial to a company because they entail a loss of revenue and potentially a loss of customers if the process is unsatisfactory. Learning that a consumer wants a refund after 50 hours, as argued in the Ahmad (2016, August 28) tweet, might make a company bitter against its consumers and therefore to merely define its consumers as entitled.

Nevertheless, as the results conveyed in Study Three show, most gamers argued that the refund time limit of two hours was too short, and they even conveyed that ten hours would be sufficient and that after that time frame passes, no refunds should be given. While still not the ideal outcome for a company, as it requires extending the refund limit, it is a much better alternative than gamers requesting a refund after 50 hours. Again, critical theory suggests that companies prefer to avoid listening to consumers lest the consumers make reasonable demands that could harm a company's reputation for not complying; however, as previously suggested, reviewing consumers' conversations can save the company resources in time and money. Moreover, company observations of public conversations can strengthen organization-public relationships (OPR), establishing stronger brand loyalty.

However, it is also important to note that not all information is created equal, and though forums can be an excellent medium for inquiry, consumers may be more interested in being right than having the right information. For example, in Study Two, an article regarding *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) criticized gamers for not realizing that a refund button for a game does not appear until after the game has officially launched. In comparison, the lack of a refund button during pre-order was mentioned, which was examined in Study Three. When corrected, users either launched an attack or simply argued that a button *should* exist. Despite community policing or disciplining from individuals as observed in Study Three, consumers can still rely on incorrect information only because it suits their arguments. Therefore, reaffirming the need for future research based on Study Three, companies should strive to separate reliable information from trolling information to better understand the expectations of their consumers.

Conclusion

When describing the business practices and engagement practices of AAA companies, one Reddit user wrote, “It’s brutal, heartless, even cruel. That should be the tagline for AAA gaming these days” (“Checking in with a few progression comments,” 2017). While this sentiment may not apply to all industries, all industries should take heed of the lessons that can be learned regarding how consumers can and do view engagement. Moreover, companies should take heed of where these consumer engagement conversations are taking place. Through the three studies, this dissertation has expanded the current engagement theory, particularly regarding consumer engagement. By examining a consumer’s general viewpoint of engagement rather than the reaction to an engagement stimulus as previous research has done, this dissertation has provided researchers and practitioners with new ways to examine consumer engagement, which can better reveal its uses and effects.

Moreover, this dissertation has provided new avenues for consumer engagement research beyond the psychographics and data mining techniques; a focus on the dialogic conversations taking place between consumers should be examined systematically. Previous research, particularly research related to social media, has shown that consumers are not inclined to engage with companies (Saffer et al., 2013; Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2017). Though this may be true, it does not mean that consumers do not want companies to consider their feedback, which is a type of engagement. If companies genuinely want to engage with their consumers, they must meet consumers in consumer-created venues and listen to their feedback about products and services. Doing so may decrease organizational control of information and communication, but the benefits of being viewed as an authentic, transparent, legitimate, and responsive company are worth the costs if a more loyal consumer base that requires fewer resources is the result.

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APPENDIX A

Table 8 Studies on player types - Reprinted from Hamari and Tuunanen (2014)

| <u>Author(s)</u> | <u>Year</u> | <u>Basis</u> | <u>Methods</u> | <u>Presented player types</u> | <u>Game in the study</u> |
|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| Whang & Chang | 2004 | Psychographic | Quantitative-factor analyses | Single-oriented player, Community-oriented player, off-real world player | Lineage (MMO) |
| Tseng | 2010 | Psychographic | Quantitative-factor analyses | Aggressive gamer, Social gamer, Inactive gamer | Online games in general |
| Yee | 2006 2007 2012 | Psychographic | Quantitative-factor analyses | Achievement, Social, Immersions (with subconstructs) | EverQuest, Dark Age of Camelot, Ultima Online, and Star Wars Galaxies (MMOs) |
| Zackariasson et al. | 2010 | Psychographic | Conceptual-analytical | Progress & provocation, Power & domination, Helping & support, Friends & collaboration, Exploration & fantasy, Story & escapism | World of Warcraft (MMO) |
| Stewart | 2011 | Behavioral Psychographic | Conceptual-analytical | Guardian/Achiever, Rational/Explorer, Idealist/Socializer, Artisan Killer, Conqueror, Wanderer, Manager, Participant, Hardcore, Casual | Combines the data from the previously mentioned studies in table. |
| Bartle | 1996 | Behavioral | Qualitative observations & conceptual-analytical | Achiever, Explorer, Socializer, Killer | MUDs |
| Lazzaro | 2004 | Behavioral | Conceptual-analytical | Easy fun, Hard fun, Altered states, The people factor | Non-exclusive |
| Drachen et al. | 2009 | Behavioral | Quantitative – clustering of gameplay data | Veteran, Solver, Pacifist, Runner | Tomb Raider: Underworld |
| Ip & Jacobs | 2005 | Behavioral | Quantitative factor analyses | Hardcore gamer, Casual gamer | Non-exclusive |
| Kallio et al. | 2011 | Behavioral | Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data | Social mentalities, Casual mentalities, Committed mentalities | Non-exclusive |
| Hamari & Lehdonvirta | 2010 | Behavioral | Conceptual-analytical combination of qualitative observations and marketing theory | Character levels and classes | Multiple online games |
| Williams et al. | 2006 | In-game demographics | Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data | Group centrality, Size of the guild, Type of server, Faction | World of Warcraft (MMO) |

APPENDIX B

Project Title: When Good Games Go Bad: Exploratory Study on Engagement of Video Game Consumers

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Sherry Holladay, Ph.D., and Katharine Hodgdon, M.A., researchers from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty for you, and you will not lose any benefits you would usually have.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to examine consumer communication regarding perceptions of video game industry business practices.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you have purchased a video game for a console or computer for your personal use in the last three years. **Specifically, we are looking for individuals who bought video games from AAA publishers, including, but not limited to, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, and Activision Blizzard.** AAA (pronounced Triple A) video games are computer and console video games with significantly high development budgets, and with significant investments into advertisement and promotion.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?

100 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally. Overall, a total of 200 people will be asked at multiple study centers.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?

You will be asked to complete a survey regarding terminology and your own experience dealing with video game companies. Survey questions are a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Your participation in this study will last up to 30-45 minutes and includes 1 visit.

Are There Any Risks To Me?

The survey that you will be completing has no more risk than what you would come across in everyday life.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?

You will not be paid for being in this study. You may receive participation credit if recruited through the Texas A&M Department of Communication Participant Pool.

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Sherry Holladay, Ph.D. and Katharine Hodgdon, M.A. will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in on computer files protected with a password.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly, and that information is appropriately collected.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?

You may contact the Principal Investigator, Sherry Holladay, Ph.D., to tell her about a concern or complaint about this research at sherry.holladay@tamu.edu. You may also contact the Protocol Director, Katharine Hodgdon, M.A. at hodgd1kc@tamu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program office at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

What if I Change My Mind About Participating?

This research is voluntary, and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide not to begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, relationship with Texas A&M University.

By completing the survey, you are permitting the investigator to use your information for research purposes.

Thank you.

Sherry Holladay, Ph.D.
Katharine Hodgdon, M.A.

Please Acknowledge The Following Statements:

- **I am 18 years or older and can read and write in English.**

- **I have purchased a video game from an AAA publisher for a console or computer for my own personal use in the last three years.** AAA (pronounced Triple A) video games are computer and console video games with significantly high development budgets, and with significant investments into advertisement and promotion.
- **I have read and understand the above information statement.**

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experiences and opinions of people who purchase and play video games. Questions also ask about your communication with other gamers and video game publishers. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions.

When it comes to video games, I like to spend my time by _____. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Playing video games (Non-professionally, including streaming for no income)
- Talking with my friends, in person, about video games
- Talking with my friends, online, about video games
- Participating in official video game forums
- Discussing video games on social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit)
- Watching Let's Plays and/or Live-Streams of Video Games
- Playing video games (Professionally, including streaming for income)
- Watching Professional Video Game Competitions

How does your time spent with media compare to the time you spend with video games? (1 = I spent less time with this media than on video games, 2 = I spend about the same time with this media and video games, 3 = I spend more time with media than on video games)

- Subscription Services (Netflix, Hulu, Spotify)
- Mobile Apps (including mobile games)
- Print Media or Online Media (Books, magazines, newspapers)
- Television (Cable Subscription, DVDs, Rentals)
- Music (CDs, Digital Downloads)
- Film (Movie Theater, DVDs, Rentals)

These questions about the types of games you are mostly likely to play.

Generally, how often do you play these types of video games on a console or computer? (1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Half of the time, 4 = Most of the time, 5 = A great deal)

- Platform (Super Mario Bros; Donkey Kong)
- First-Person Shooters (Half Life; Wolfenstein)
- Fighting (Tekken; Mortal Kombat)
- Stealth (Metal Gear; Sly Cooper)
- Survival (7 Days to Die; Ark: Survival Evolved)
- Rhythm (Guitar Hero; Dance Dance Revolution)
- Horror (Silent Hill; Resident Evil)

- Simulation (The Sims; Animal Crossing)
- Role Playing (Dragon Age; Skyrim)
- Fantasy (Legend of Zelda; The Witcher)
- Real-time strategy (Age of Empires; Starcraft)
- Turn-based strategy (Civilization)
- Multiplayer online battle arena (League of Legends; Dota)
- Sports (FIFA; Madden)
- Racing (Mario Kart; Need for Speed)
- Massively multiplayer online (World of Warcraft)
- Party (Mario Party; Rayman Raving Rabbids)
- Puzzle (Tetris; Portal)

How much of your disposable income do you spend on products and services related to video games?

- None at all
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

How likely are you to pre-order a video game for your personal use for a console or a computer?

- Extremely unlikely
- Moderately unlikely
- Slightly unlikely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Slight likely
- Moderately likely
- Extremely likely

Please answer the following questions based on your own experiences and opinions and elaborate on your answers.

Open-Ended Questions

- How would you describe the characteristics (behaviors & attitudes) of a casual gamer?
- How would you describe the characteristics (behaviors & attitudes) of an average gamer?
- How would you describe the characteristics (behaviors & attitudes) of a hardcore gamer?

Using the sliding scale below, how would you describe yourself as a gamer? (0-100)

Open-Ended Question

- Please explain why you would describe yourself as this kind of gamer?

Based on how you described yourself above, do you believe video game publishers are meeting your wants and needs for video game products and services?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Open-Ended Question

- Please explain your answer.

INSOGA (Kallio)

We are interested in finding out how you play, and – above all – what kinds of experiences, opinions, and feelings you have related to gaming. The most important thing is that you answer the questions on the basis of your own experiences.

Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Playing is one of my everyday routines.
- I easily lose myself into thinking about games' problems.
- I compare my success in games with my circle of friends.
- I share hints and experiences with my friends.
- I am proud of the experiences I have gained by playing.
- Sometimes I think about games while I am not playing.
- I often plan game strategies in advance.
- When I have become good enough in a game, I play it again in a different way.
- I like to plan improvements for games on my own.
- I play at work to relax.
- I typically do something else while I am playing.
- When I play, I concentrate only on the events in the game world.

Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Playing is a way to spend time with friends.
- I often talk with someone while I am playing.
- I prefer to play with the company of others.
- When I am playing, I feel I am interacting with others without prejudices.
- It is important for me to be a part of a game group or a guild.
- The success of my group is more important to me than my own.
- I am happy to do a lot for my game group.
- If I skip playing I feel I am letting my group down.

Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Time passes unnoticed while I am playing.
- While I am playing, I concentrate only on the events of the game world.
- Events in games can be touching.
- The characters in games have qualities which I would like to have for myself.
- I bond with my character.
- I empathize with my character.
- Sometimes events in games seem to happen to me.
- Some game characters feel alive.
- I get annoyed when my character dies.
- I can do things in games I otherwise could not.
- I like crooked and cunning characters.
- I enjoy the fantasy and the story in games.
- I am free to do what I want in games.
- People are unequal in games.
- When I play, I enjoy doing things my money or my skills would not be enough for in real life.
- In games, I am free of the restrictions set by age, gender, status and social group.
- I enjoy beating others in games.
- Winning is not important to me.

Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- I can forget my own worries when I play.
- Playing is relaxing.
- I sometimes reward myself with playing.
- Games mean a time and a place without outside pressure for me.
- Playing cheers me up.
- Playing makes me feel energetic.
- Playing is sometimes frustrating.
- Playing can sometimes induce negative feelings.
- I feel I am important when I play.
- I am my 'own master' when I play.
- When I play I know what I am doing.
- I can be entirely myself in games.
- I learn new skills from games.
- I gain new knowledge from games.

ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

These questions pertain to ideal communication with AAA video game publishers (e.g., Electronic Arts, Ubisoft). Please answer the open-ended questions honestly based on your experiences and opinions.

Reminder: AAA (pronounced Triple A) video games are computer and console video games with significantly high development budgets, and with significant investments into advertisement and promotion.

Open-Ended Questions

- How would you describe ideal “authentic interaction” with an AAA publisher?
- How would you describe ideal “**transparent communication**” from an AAA publisher?
- How would you describe ideal “**legitimate communication**” from an AAA video game publisher?
- How would you describe ideal “**responsive communication**” from an AAA publisher?

How important to you is _____ from an AAA publisher? (1= Not at all important, 2 = Slightly important, 3 = Moderately important, 4 = Very important, 5 = Extremely important)

- Authentic communication
- Transparent communication
- Legitimate communication
- Responsive Communication

These questions pertain to how you think AAA video game publishers communicate. Please answer the questions honestly based on your experiences and opinions.

When responding to consumer concerns, is the communication by AAA video game publishers _____? (1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = About half the time, 4 = Most of the time, 5 = Always)

- Generally consistent with their values, beliefs, and mission
- Communicate valid information about their products and services
- Actively participate in acquiring, distributing, and creating knowledge for their products and services
- Illustrate ethical communication practices with consumers
- Quickly answer those feedback and concerns?
- Appropriately address those concerns

Open-Ended Questions

- Please Explain Your Answer (after each variable).

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT (Kumar and Pansari)

These statements ask about your overall engagement with AAA video game publishers and other gamers.

Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- I will continue buying products/services from the video game industry in the near future.
- My video game purchases make me content.
- I do not get my money's worth when I purchase a video game.
- Owning video game products/services makes me happy.
- I do not actively discuss video games on any media.
- I love talking about my video game experience.
- I discuss the benefits that I get from a video game with others.
- I am part of the video game community and mention it in my conversations.
- I provide feedback about my experiences with a video game to the company.
- I provide suggestions for improving the performance of the video game.
- I provide suggestions/feedbacks about the new products/services of a video game.
- I provide feedback/suggestions for developing new products/services of a video game.

Do you play or record/live-stream yourself playing video games for income?

- Yes
- No

[IF YES] You have indicated that you play or record/live-stream yourself playing video games for income. These statements assess the monetary benefits you may receive from an AAA video game publisher. Please answer to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- I promote a video game because of the monetary referral benefits provided by a company.
- In addition to the value derived from the product, the monetary referral incentives also encourage me to refer a video game to my friends and relatives.
- I enjoy referring a video game to my friends relatives because of the monetary referral incentives.
- Given that I play a video game, I refer my friends and relatives to the game because of the monetary referral incentives.

CONCERNS

These questions ask if you have ever communicated to others about your concerns with video game products & services. Please answer honestly based on your own experiences and opinions.

How often have YOU personally communicated a concern about a video game product or service to a video game publisher?

- I have never communicated about a concern.
- I sometimes communicate about concerns.
- Most of the time I communicate about my concerns.
- I always communicate about my concerns.

How often have YOU personally communicated a concern about a video game product or service to other gamers?

- I have never communicated about a concern.
- I sometimes communicate about concerns.
- Most of the time I communicate about my concerns.
- I always communicate about my concerns.

Imagine you are upset about a video game or service that did not meet your expectations. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

I WOULD personally communicate a concern to a video game publisher if a newly released product: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Was overpriced
- Had appearance/graphical glitches
- Has overpriced downloadable content (DLC)
- Had microtransactions
- Seemed misleading in promotional materials
- Did not seem ready for release
- Requires extra accessories that are not available with game purchase

I WOULD personally communicate a concern to other gamers if a newly released product: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Was overpriced
- Had appearance/graphical glitches
- Has overpriced downloadable content (DLC)
- Had microtransactions
- Seemed misleading in promotional materials
- Did not seem ready for release
- Requires extra accessories that are not available with game purchase

ATTITUDES TOWARD BEHAVIORS (Keng)

These statements refer to your own assumptions and opinions about AAA video game publishers responding to complaints and customer engagement.

I feel that most AAA publishers: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Are unpleasant to me when I return an unsatisfactory product.
- Are willing to replace faulty products.
- Do not take notice when I make a complaint.
- Will cheat you if you don't stand up for your rights.
- Are willing to provide refunds for faulty products.
- Have advertisements that present a true picture of the product.

- Take a long time to respond to a complaint.
- Say they want satisfied customers but are not willing to stand behind their word.
- Are usually willing to provide repairs for fault products.

COMPLAINTS (Gregoire)

I would complain to an AAA video game publisher to: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Constructively discuss the problem
- Find an acceptable solution for both parties
- Work with its representatives to solve the problem.
- Give the representative(s) a hard time.
- Be unpleasant with the representative(s) of the company.
- Make someone from the organization pay for its poor service.

How likely are you to use these communication platforms to complain to an AAA video game publisher? (1 = Extremely unlikely, 2 = Moderately unlikely, 3 = Slightly unlikely, 4 = Neither likely nor unlikely, 5 = Slight likely, 6 = Moderately likely, 7 = Extremely likely)

- Company Phone Number
- Company Email
- Customer Service Form
- Official Video Game Forums
- Company Facebook
- Company Twitter
- Company Subreddit
- Company Twitch
- Company YouTube
- In-Person with Company Representative

These statements refer to why you would complain to other gamers about a negative customer engagement experience with an AAA publisher.

I would complain to other gamers to: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Spread negative word-of mouth about the video game publisher.
- Warn my friends not to buy from the video game publisher.
- Make public the behaviors of the video game publisher.
- Report my experience about the video game publisher.
- Spread the word about the video game publisher.

How likely are you to use these communication platforms to complain to other gamers? (1 = Extremely unlikely, 2 = Moderately unlikely, 3 = Slightly unlikely, 4 = Neither likely nor unlikely, 5 = Slight likely, 6 = Moderately likely, 7 = Extremely likely)

- Facebook

- Twitter
- Reddit
- Official Game Forums
- Twitch Chat
- YouTube Comments
- Discord Chat
- In-Person

RETALITORY BEHAVIORS

These statements refer to actions you would take against an AAA video game publisher over a negative customer engagement experience.

If an AAA video game publisher does not acknowledge or disregards my complaint after contact regarding a video game product or service, I would: (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree)

- Start an activist campaign against the publisher.
- Refuse to buy anymore products from the publisher.
- Pirate products from the publisher in hopes the publisher will lose money.
- Create a modification that changes the video game.
- Disrupt playing service through digital hacking.
- Troll and harass other players in a game to disrupt service.
- Troll and harass the publisher and its representatives through social media.
- Reveal private information about the publisher and its representatives (e.g., mobile number, home address, relationships).
- Make a fake emergency call about the publishers and its representatives (i.e., SWATting).

For the actions you are likely to do, do you feel justified in your approach?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Open Ended Questions

- Please explain your answer
- Is there anything else you would like to add to help us understand your experiences?

We appreciate you completing this survey to help us learn more about consumer expectations of video gamers. Finally, please provide demographic information to help us better assess the wants, needs, and expectations of the video game consumer community. Thank you!

Gender

- Male
- Female

- Beyond the Binary
- Prefer Not to Say

Age

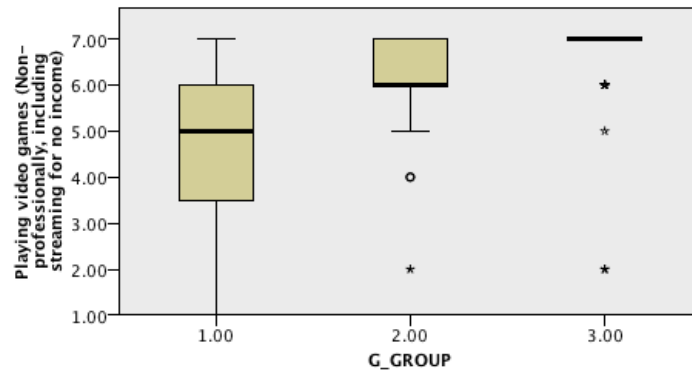
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55 or older
- Prefer Not to Say

Education

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2 year degree
- 4 year degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate
- Prefer Not to Say

APPENDIX C

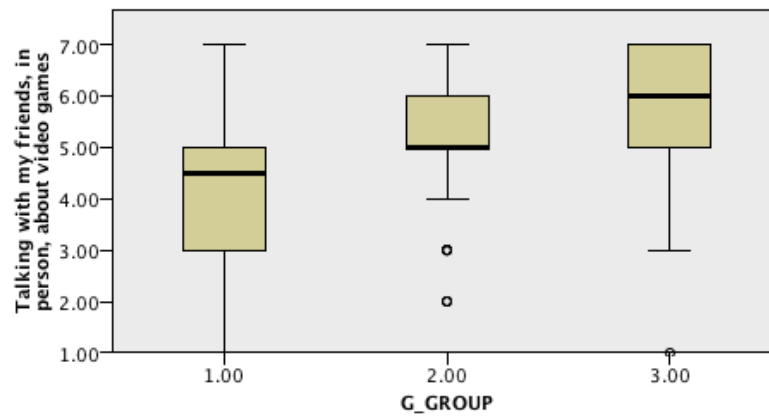
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,730.000 |
| Standard Error | 455.166 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 7.430 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 1 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Playing video games, non-professionally

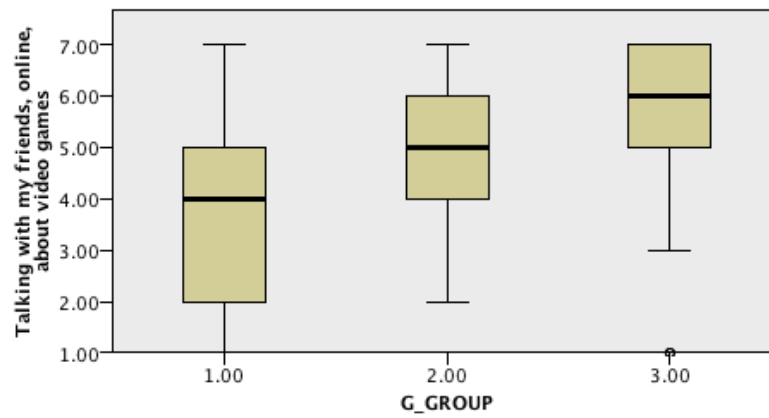
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,510.000 |
| Standard Error | 469.886 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 6.729 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 2 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Talking with friends, in person about games

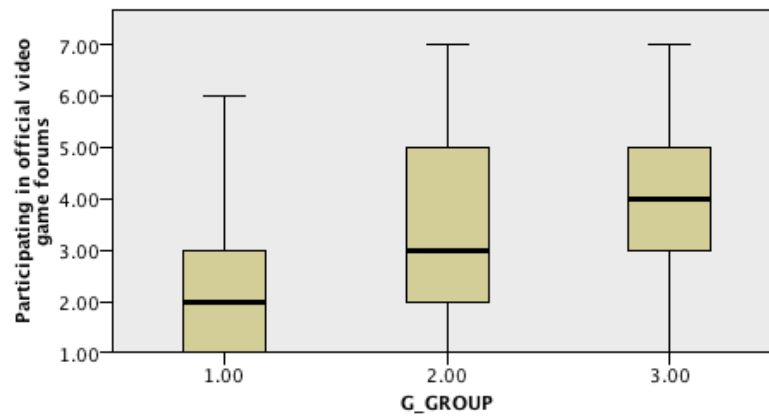
Independent-Samples Jonckheere–Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,563.000 |
| Standard Error | 476.873 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 6.742 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 3 Jonckheere–Terpstra test for Talking with friends, online about games

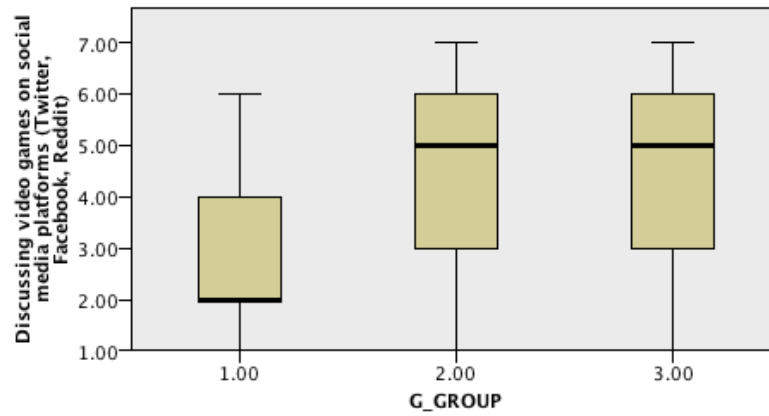
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,106.500 |
| Standard Error | 474.277 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 5.816 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 4 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Participating in official video game forums

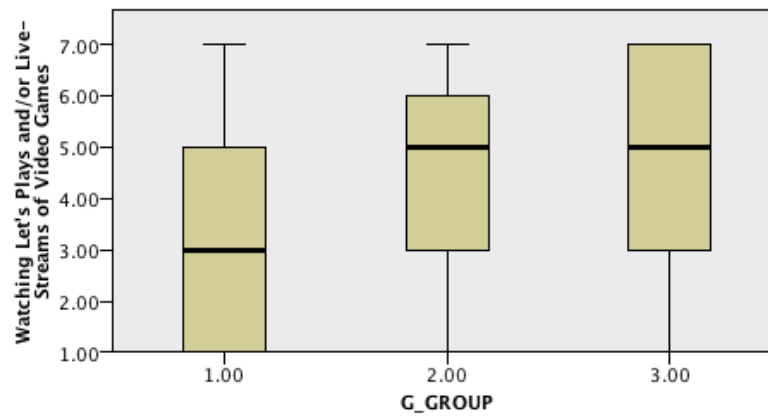
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,136.000 |
| Standard Error | 477.543 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 5.838 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 5 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Discussing video games on social media

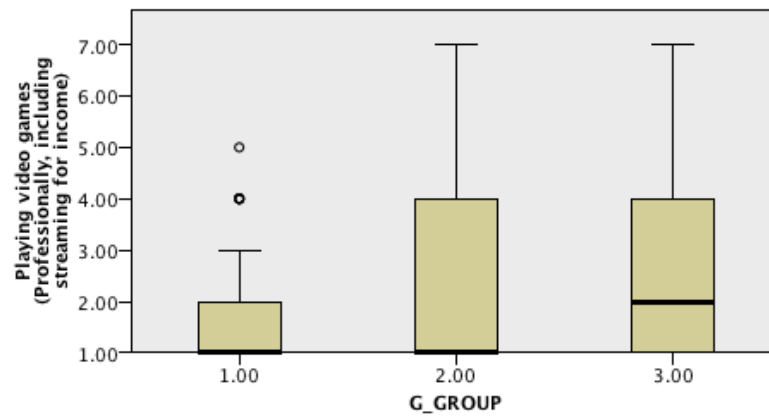
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 9,482.000 |
| Standard Error | 477.886 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 4.466 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 6 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Watching Let's Plays

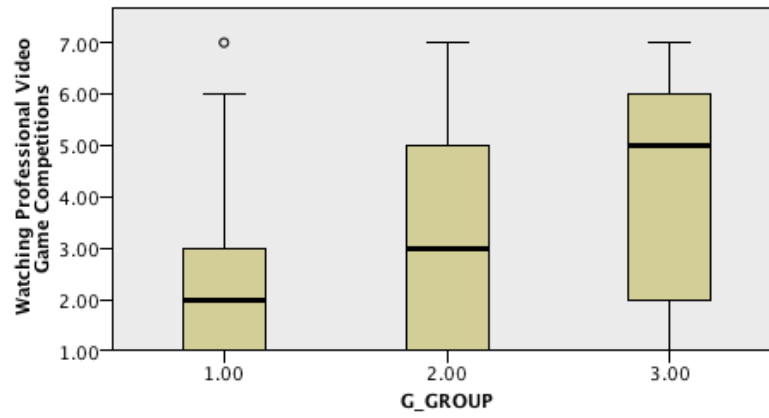
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 8,789.500 |
| Standard Error | 446.016 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 3.232 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .001 |

Figure 7 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Playing video games professionally

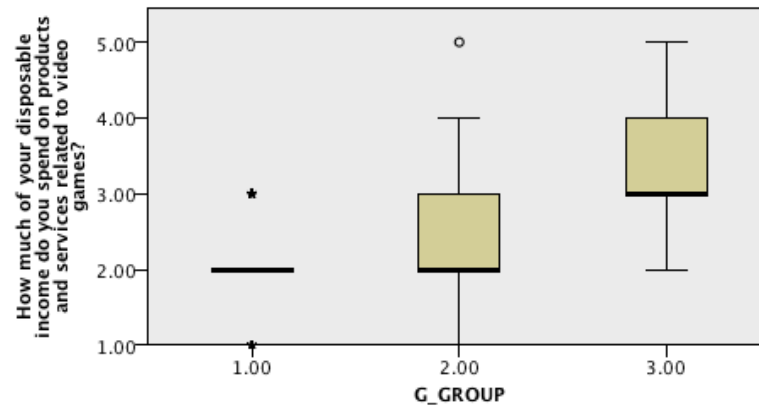
Independent-Samples Jonckheere–Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 9,737.500 |
| Standard Error | 474.681 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 5.034 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 8 Jonckheere–Terpstra test for Watching professional video game competitions

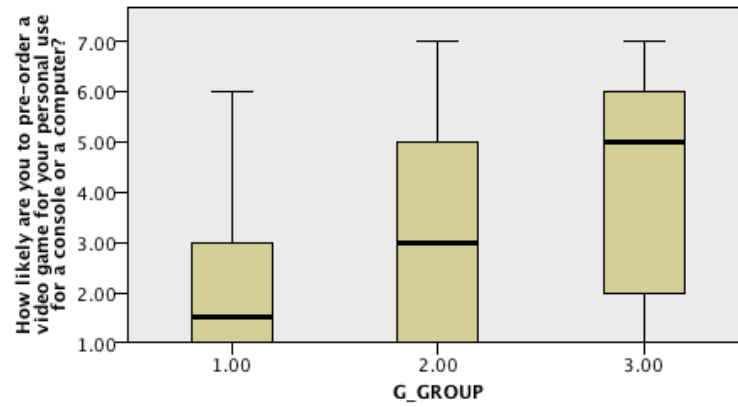
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 11,038.500 |
| Standard Error | 446.322 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 8.269 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

Figure 9 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Disposable Income

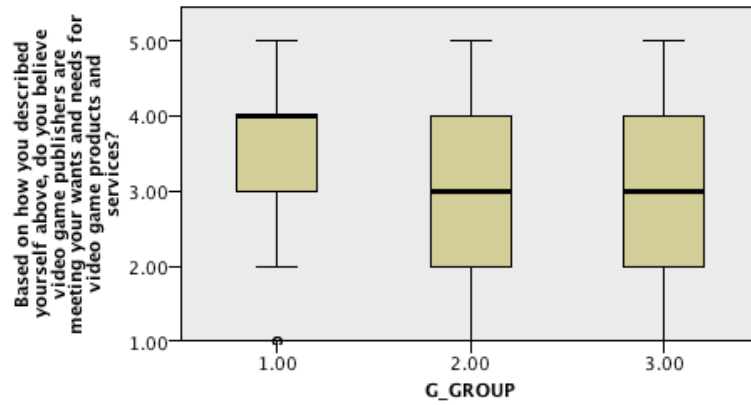
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 9,736.000 |
| Standard Error | 472.024 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 5.059 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

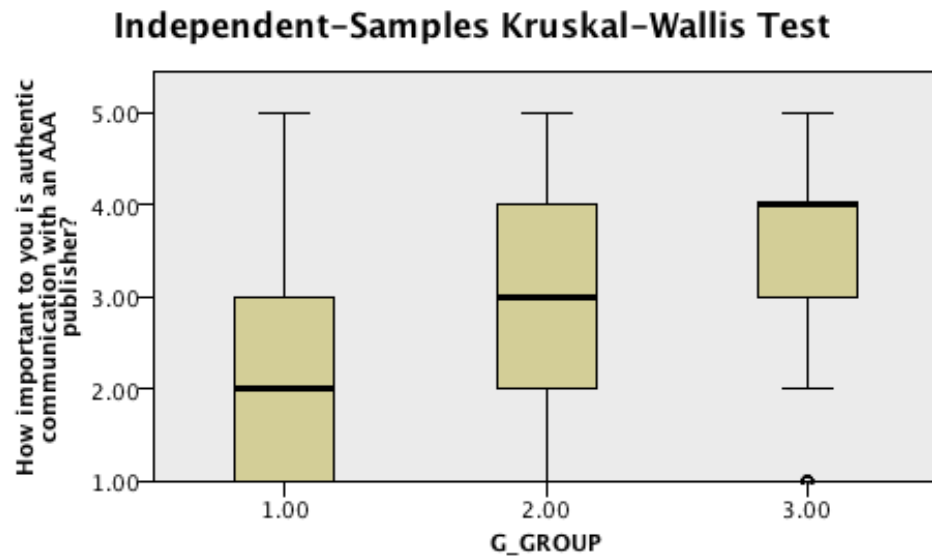
Figure 10 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Pre-Order Video Games

Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 6,134.000 |
| Standard Error | 463.567 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | -2.619 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .009 |

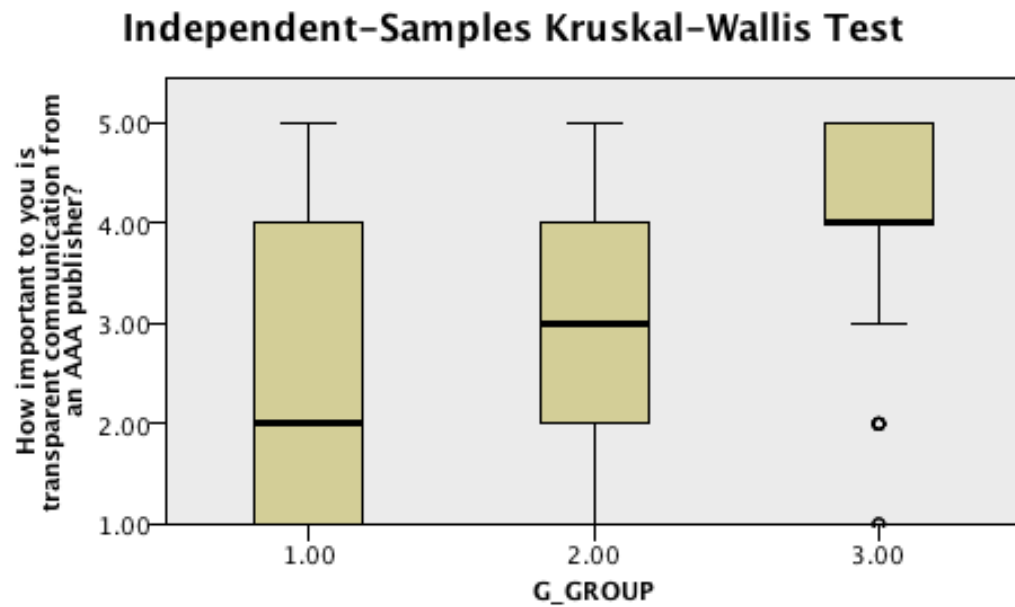
Figure 11 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Meeting Wants and Needs



| | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 30.505 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

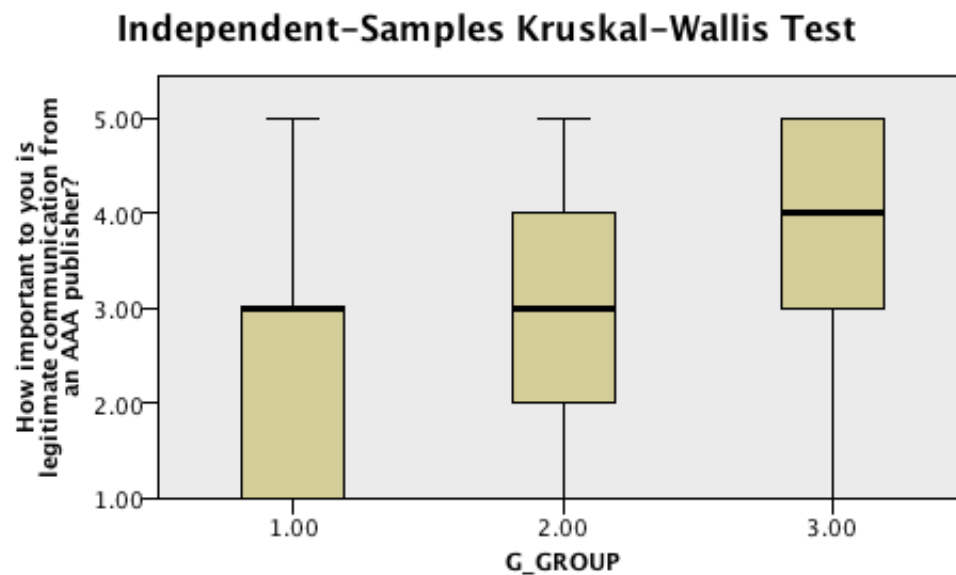
Figure 12 Kruskal-Wallis test for Authenticity



| | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 33.763 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

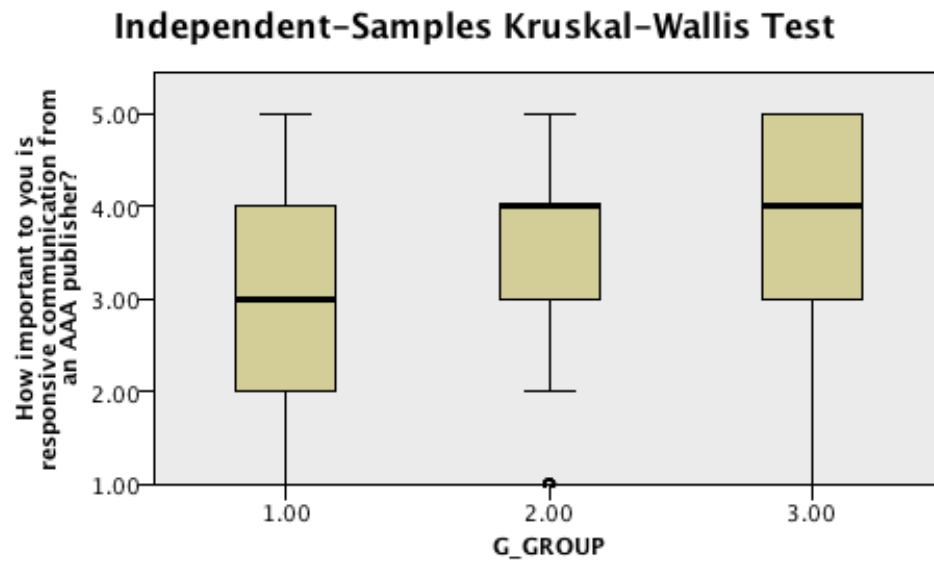
Figure 13 Kruskal-Wallis test for Transparency



| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 24.426 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

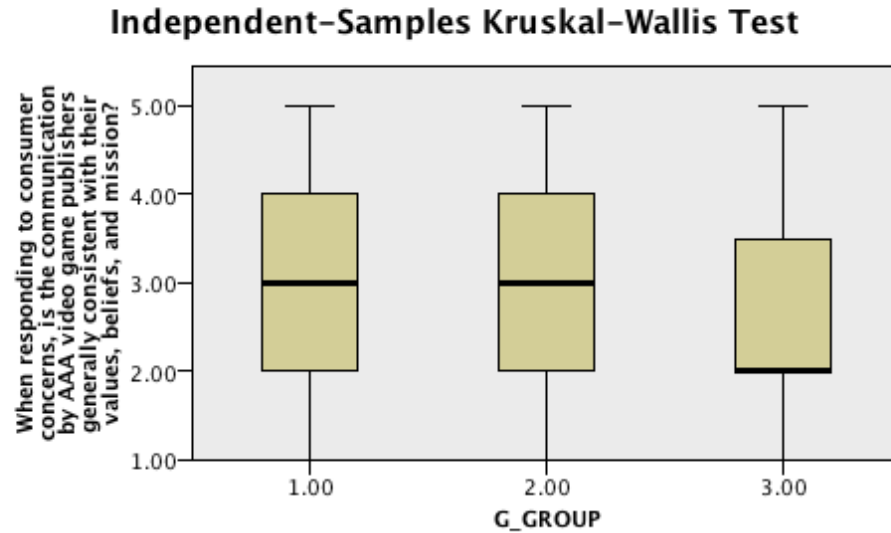
Figure 14 Kruskal-Wallis test for Legitimacy



| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 15.052 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .001 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

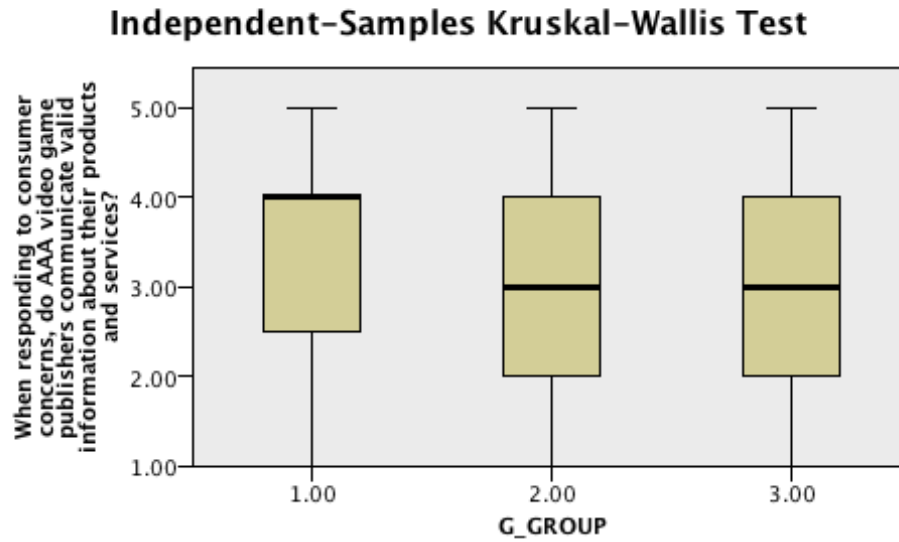
Figure 15 Kruskal-Wallis test for Responsiveness



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 6.453 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .040 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

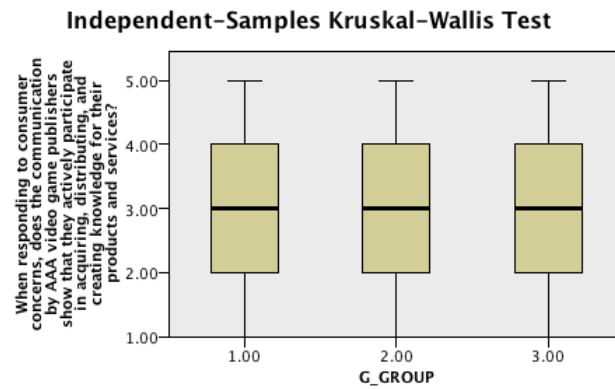
Figure 16 Kruskal-Wallis test for “consistent with their values, beliefs, and mission”



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 6.880 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .032 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

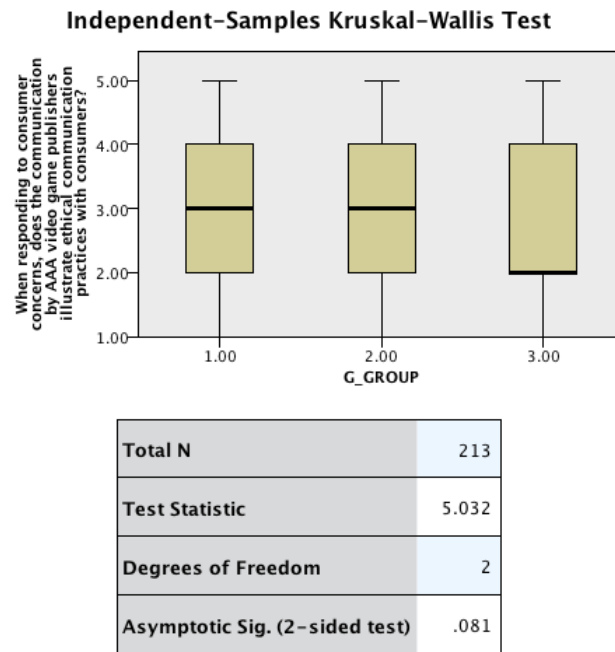
Figure 17 Kruskal-Wallis test for “communicate valid information about their products and services”



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 2.309 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .315 |

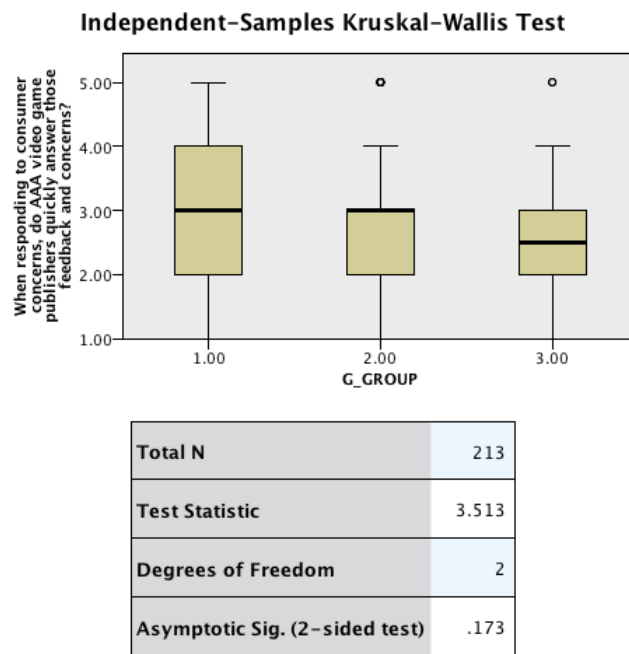
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 18 Kruskal-Wallis test for “actively participate in acquiring, distributing, and creating knowledge for their products and services”



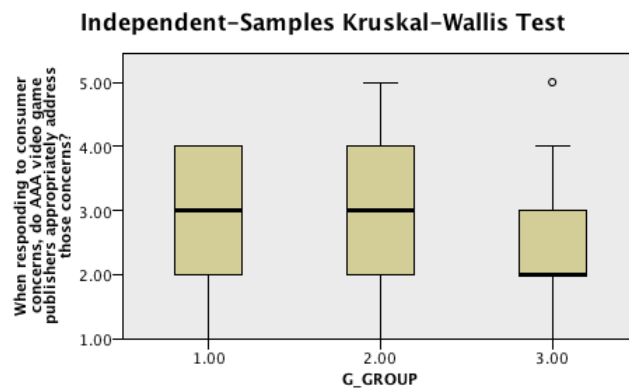
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 19 Kruskal-Wallis test for “illustrate ethical communication practices with consumers”



1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

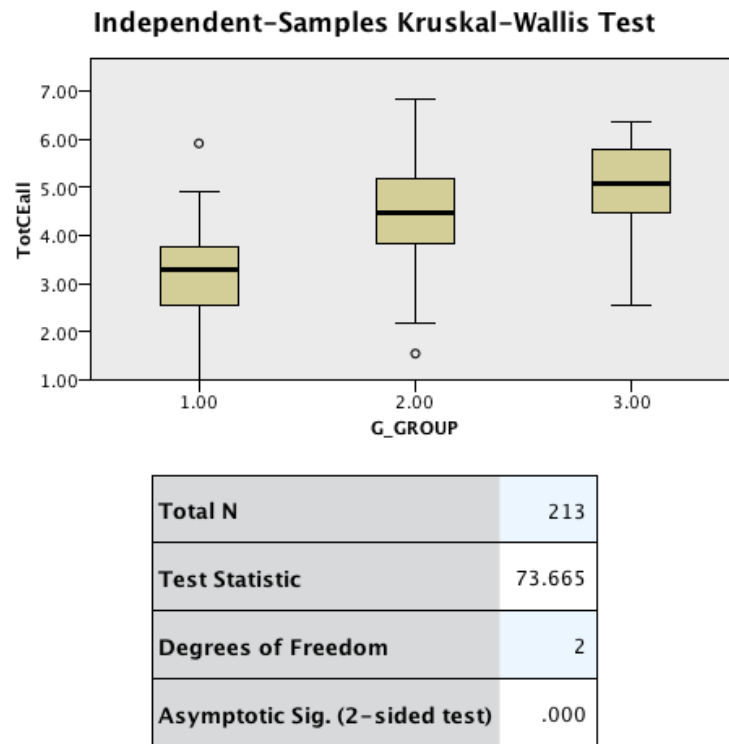
Figure 20 Kruskal-Wallis test for “quickly answer those feedback and concerns”



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 4.683 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .096 |

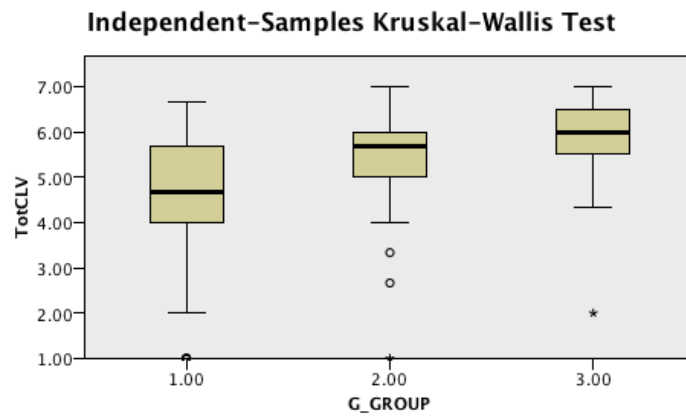
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 21 Kruskal-Wallis test for “quickly answer those feedback and concerns”



1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

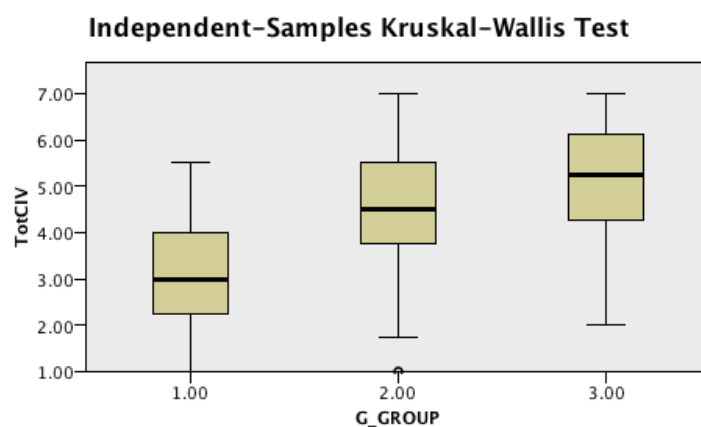
Figure 22 Kruskal-Wallis test for Consumer Engagement



| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 37.580 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

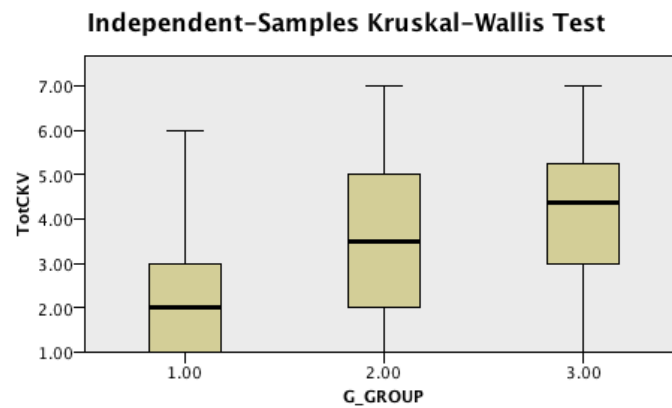
Figure 23 Kruskal-Wallis test for Consumer Lifetime Value (CLV)



| | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 66.783 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 24 Kruskal-Wallis test for Consumer Influence Value (CIV)

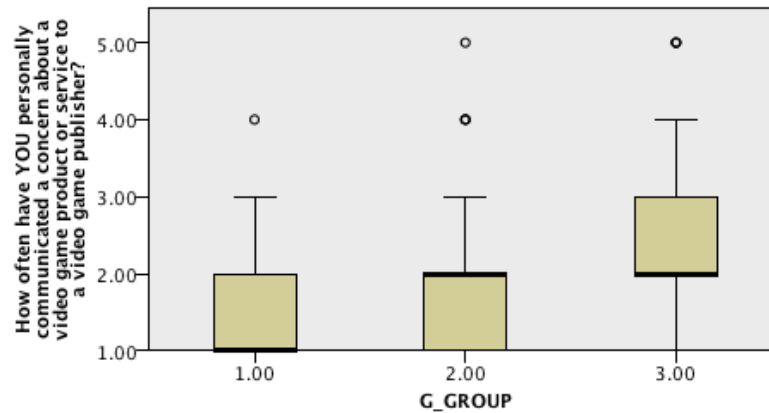


| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 38.220 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 25 Kruskal-Wallis test for Consumer Knowledge Value (CKV)

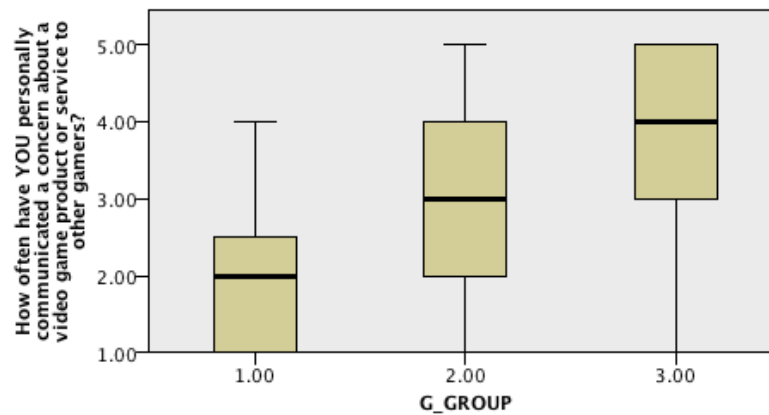
Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 9,841.000 |
| Standard Error | 445.288 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 5.599 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

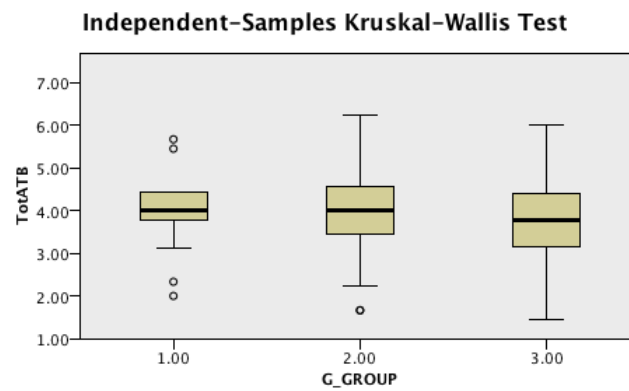
Figure 26 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Communicating a Concern to Publishers

Independent-Samples Jonckheere-Terpstra Test for Ordered Alternatives



| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 10,720.000 |
| Standard Error | 470.715 |
| Standardized Test Statistic | 7.164 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

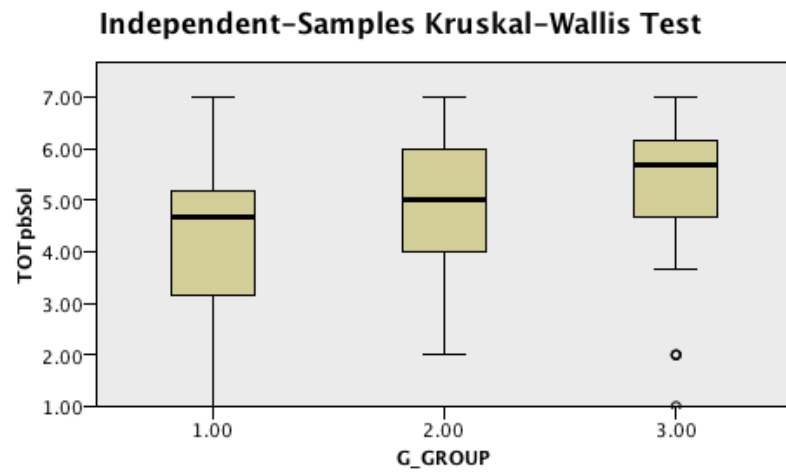
Figure 27 Jonckheere-Terpstra test for Communicating a Concern to Gamers



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 5.339 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .069 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

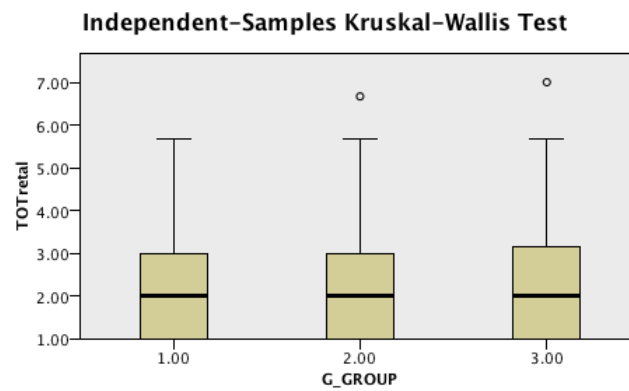
Figure 28 Kruskal-Wallis test for Attitudes Toward Businesses



| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 17.595 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

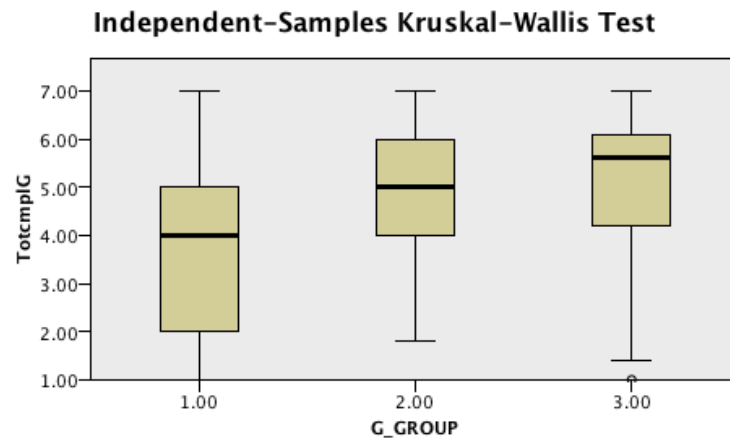
Figure 29 Kruskal-Wallis test for Problem-Solving Complaining



| | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | .811 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .667 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

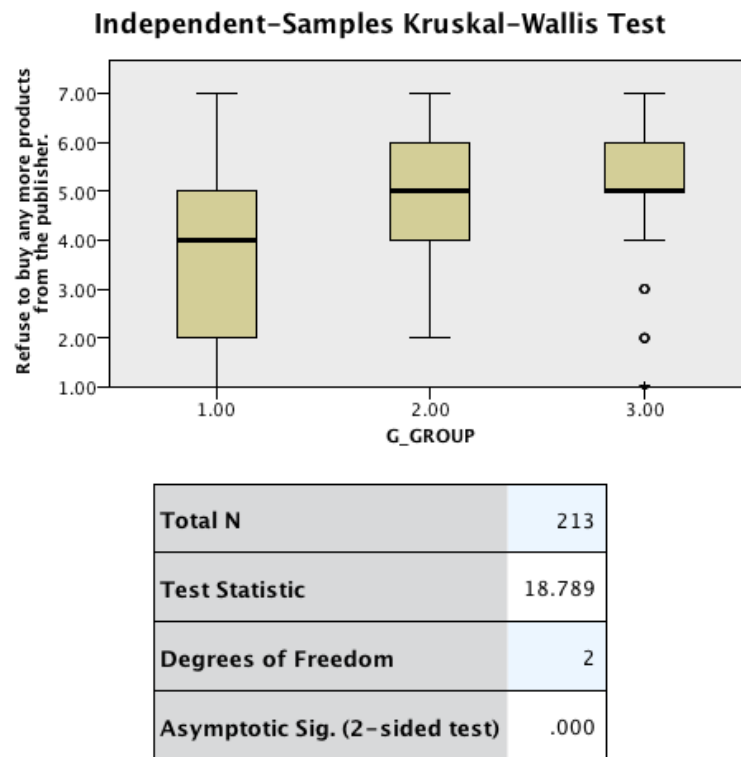
Figure 30 Kruskal-Wallis test for Vindictive Complaining



| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 25.030 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .000 |

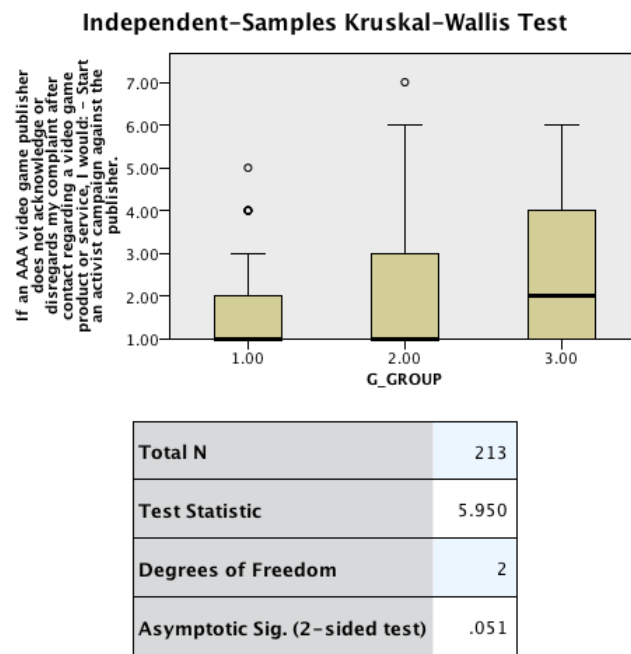
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 31 Kruskal-Wallis test for Complaining to Gamers



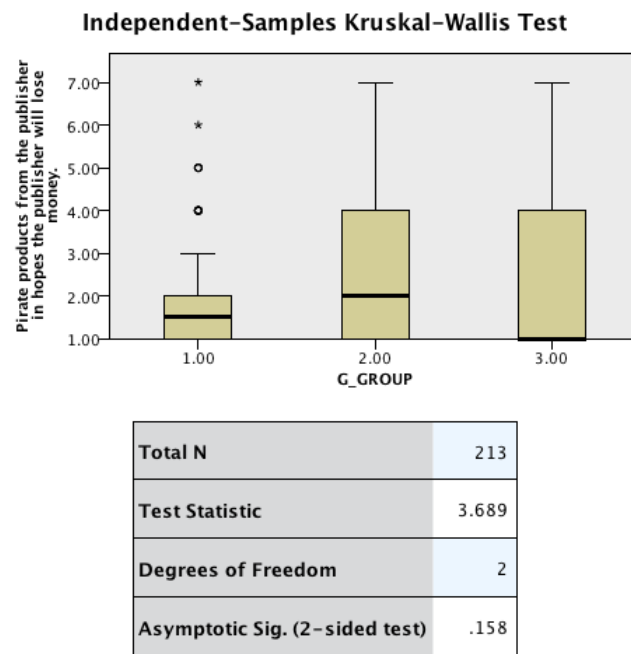
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 32 Kruskal-Wallis test for Refuse to Buy Products



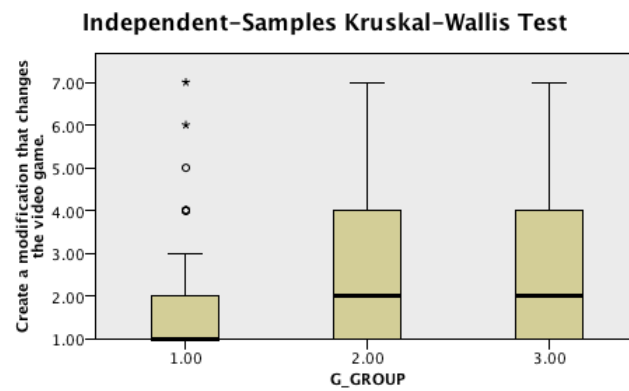
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 33 Kruskal-Wallis test for Start an Activist Campaign



1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

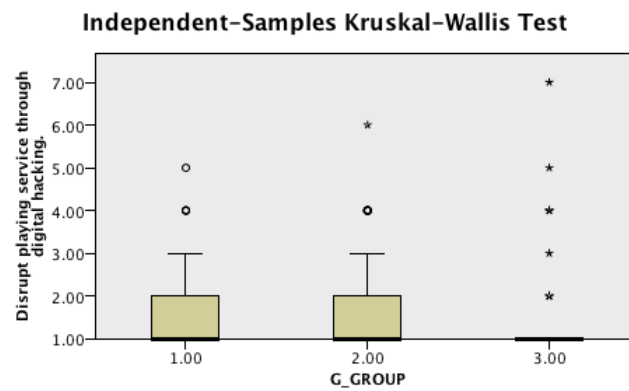
Figure 34 Kruskal-Wallis test for Pirate Products



| | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 4.750 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .093 |

1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

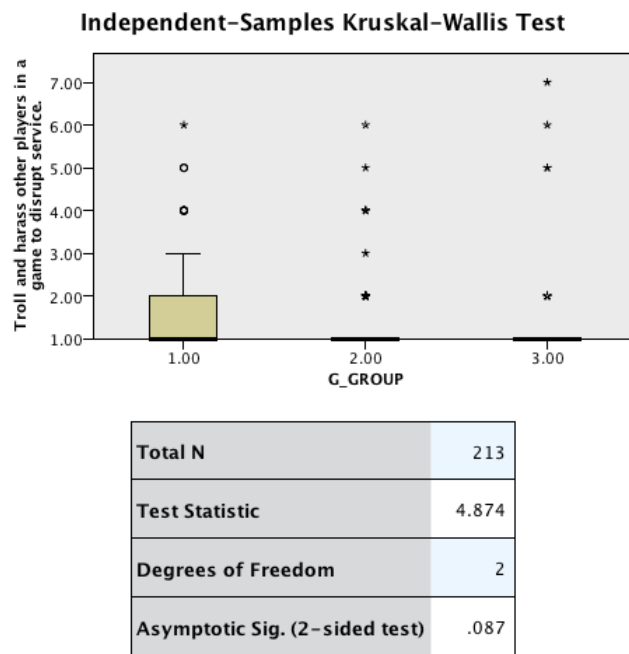
Figure 35 Kruskal-Wallis test for Create a modification



| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Total N | 213 |
| Test Statistic | 2.868 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 2 |
| Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test) | .238 |

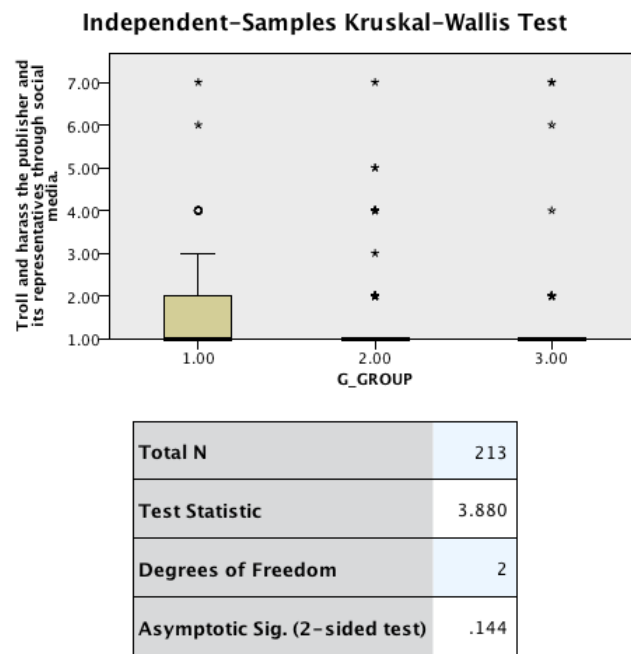
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 36 Kruskal-Wallis test for Disrupt playing service through digital hacking



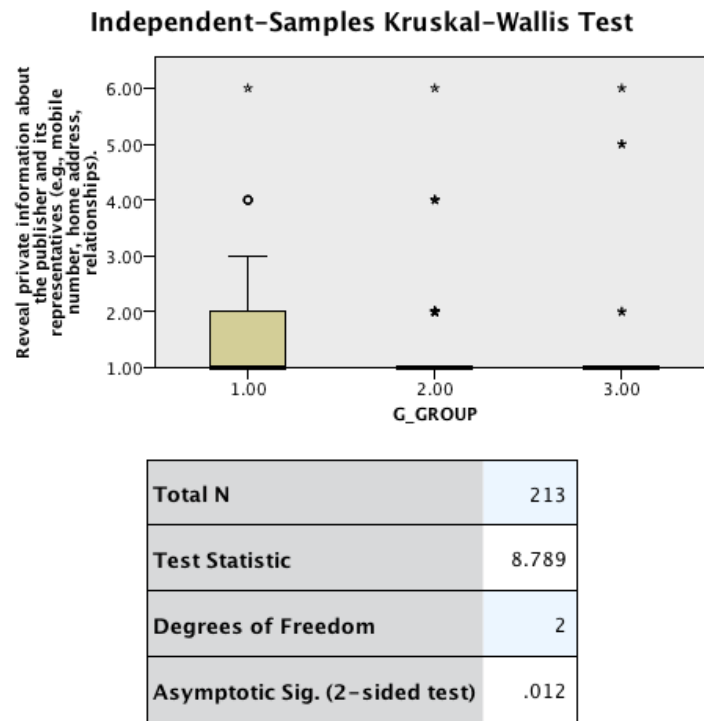
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 37 Kruskal-Wallis test for Troll and harass other players



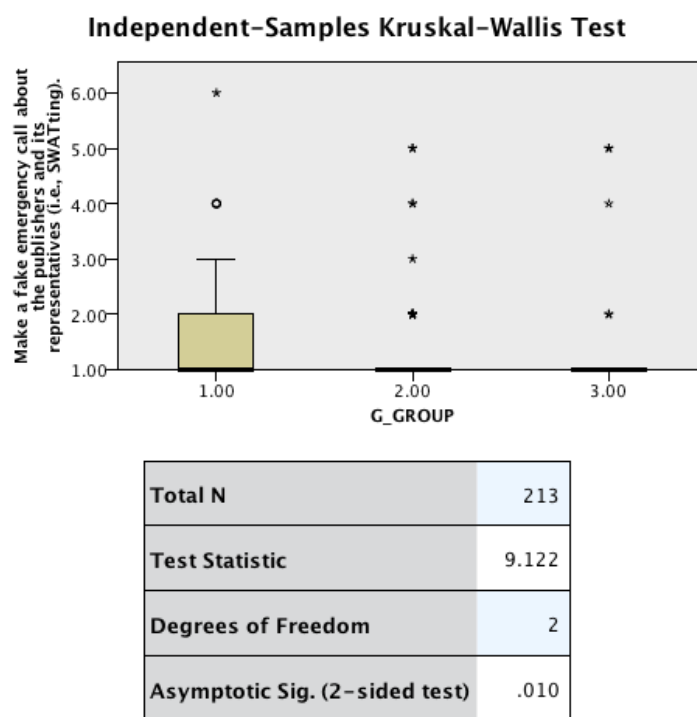
1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.
2. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Figure 38 Kruskal-Wallis test for Troll and harass the publisher



1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 39 Kruskal-Wallis test for Reveal private information about the publisher and its representatives



1. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Figure 40 Kruskal-Wallis test for Make a fake emergency call about the publishers and its representatives

APPENDIX D

| Nodes | MEA Promotional Material | SWB2 Promotional Material | NMS Promotional Material | Total |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Company & Industry | 3.7% | 3.33% | 42.25% | 25% |
| Consumers & Actions | 3.7% | 13.33% | 18.31% | 14.06% |
| Expectations | 0% | 0% | 4.23% | 2.34% |
| Honesty & Deception | 0% | 0% | 1.41% | 0.78% |
| Information Collection | 25.93% | 30% | 7.04% | 16.41% |
| Microtransactions & Loot Boxes | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Monetary | 0% | 0% | 4.23% | 2.34% |
| Public Relations & Marketing | 44.44% | 20% | 18.31% | 24.22% |
| Technical Features | 22.22% | 33.33% | 4.23% | 14.84% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Figure 41 Promotional Material Crosstab Query

| Nodes | MEA Critiques | SWB2 Critiques | NMS Critiques | Total |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| Company & Industry | 16.95% | 0% | 27.89% | 19.45% |
| Consumers & Actions | 8.47% | 19.51% | 10.2% | 10.41% |
| Expectations | 2.82% | 0% | 3.4% | 2.74% |
| Honesty & Deception | 0% | 0% | 9.52% | 3.84% |
| Information Collection | 1.69% | 4.88% | 2.72% | 2.47% |
| Microtransactions & Loot Boxes | 0% | 29.27% | 0% | 3.29% |
| Monetary | 1.69% | 12.2% | 6.12% | 4.66% |
| Public Relations & Marketing | 4.52% | 26.83% | 30.61% | 17.53% |
| Technical Features | 63.84% | 7.32% | 9.52% | 35.62% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Figure 42 Critiques Crosstab Query

APPENDIX E










| Nodes | Mass Effect Andromeda | No Man's Sky | Star Wars Battlefront 2 | Total |
|--|--------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------------|
|  Company & Industry | 7.3% | 29.26% | 5.61% | 19.92% |
|  Consumers & Actions | 30.66% | 13.85% | 22.98% | 18.34% |
|  Expectations | 12.41% | 7.12% | 4.57% | 6.92% |
|  Honesty & Deception | 2.19% | 6.02% | 1.7% | 4.33% |
|  Information Collection | 4.38% | 2.78% | 3.79% | 3.25% |
|  Microtransactions & Loot Boxes | 0% | 0.06% | 12.4% | 3.71% |
|  Monetary | 7.3% | 10.36% | 19.45% | 12.73% |
|  Public Relations & Marketing | 16.06% | 20.84% | 14.36% | 18.41% |
|  Technical Features | 19.71% | 9.71% | 15.14% | 12.38% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Figure 43 Reddit Crosstab Query