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Staying objective: the effect of corporate public relations on video game journalists

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STAYING OBJECTIVE:
THE EFFECT OF CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS ON
VIDEO GAME JOURNALISTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

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by
Benjamin Jenkins
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ABSTRACT

The video game industry makes more than \$10 billion a year in the United States alone. It is a young and booming medium. Growing alongside the video game business is the video game media, a niche form of journalism comprised mostly of gaming websites and a few reporters in traditional media.

This thesis examines the young gaming news industry through in-depth interviews conducted with six journalists from various news outlets. The research focused on two things: if game journalists followed the same norms and routines as news journalists and if game companies were able to influence what game journalists wrote through public relations efforts.

To determine what standards game journalists followed, the researcher asked the participants about each of the journalistic norm and routines. The norms of journalism are news value, objectivity, balance and fairness, professionalism, watchdog role, enduring values, style and format, scoop, and professional cooperation. To find out about outside influences affecting the work of the journalists, the researcher asked participants questions about their interaction with PR workers, how they perceived themselves being influence, and how they perceived other being influenced.

The researcher found that video game journalists followed the norms and routines of news journalism and that game journalists are perceived themselves to be free from the influence of video game companies.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The video game industry makes more than \$10 billion a year in the United States alone (*Industry Facts*, 2010). Video game fans keep up with what is happening in the gaming world mainly through a specialized news media dedicated to nothing but video games. This game journalism is relatively young compared to other forms of news and is still seeking credibility in the news world.

This study examines the video game media to find out two things: 1) if it adheres to the same standards that are expected of news media and 2) if the video game companies are able to control what the game journalists write. Researching this topic provides an opportunity to look at a rapidly growing media still in its infancy, and offers consumer insight to gaming media by distinguishing between objective reporting and industry controlled media.

Although the mainstream news media do report on the video game industry, not many news outlets have journalists or space dedicated to gaming. Gamers can also attain information about games from their peers but this is not a reliable source for industry news. Instead, gamers must rely on the alternative gaming media to get most of their information about video games.

There are generally two types of information found on gaming media sites; reviews and news. Game reviews inform consumers about what a game is like, what is good, what is bad, and usually have a system to rate a game such as a five star rating. Informing consumers about new titles is an invaluable service when new games can cost as much as sixty dollars and purchasing a bad game can leave gamers frustrated. Many reviewers use set metrics when reviewing a game in an effort to ensure all games are reviewed fairly. When reviewing a game, the writers often look at factors like graphics, game play, replayability, and length of the game, to name a few. Although there are set criteria that reviewers look at when reviewing a game, game reviews are

still subjective by nature. A reviewer talks about how they feel the game measures up to whatever standards they have set for a game and ultimately they say whether they feel a game is good or not.

Gaming news journalists write about the game industry and the events taking place in it. Much like a political reporter informs readers about what is going on in the political sphere, game journalists inform consumers about what is happening in the video game industry. A recent example of a big news story in the gaming media is the fallout between Jason West and Vince Zampella of Infinity Ward and their parent company Activision (McWhertor, 2010). West and Zampella were chief technical officer and chief executive officer, respectively, for Infinity Ward. Their company produced the Call of Duty game series, a series that has earned more than \$3 billion in its existence (McWhertor, 2010). Shortly after the launch of the greatly successful Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Activision fired West and Zampella for breaches of contract and insubordination. Accusations and lawsuits from both sides ensued, the result of which are yet to be decided. This Activision/Infinity Ward story is a prime example of the type of news that the gaming media provides and avid gamers clamor for because it holds serious ramifications for games that these consumers are passionate about.

There are several striking differences between the niche video game media and the mainstream news media. Unlike the news media, gaming media generally only report on one topic, video games. Game companies are aware that gaming websites are the primary source of industry information for gamers, so they use these sites to reach their target audience. Advertising on a few game sites allows the game companies to reach more consumers with less effort.

Consequently, game studios are often the lone buyers of advertisement space on gaming websites. Ad sales are how video game sites make their money so when the video game companies that the journalists report on are their main source of revenue, it can leave game journalists in a strange position (Ashley & Elliot, 2009). This relationship can create a dependence upon game companies by the industry media and potentially puts the game companies in a position of power. In their article for *Gamasutra*, game journalists Robert Ashley and Shawn Elliot (2009) recount an e-mail they received from the head of a game studio illustrating how he viewed video game journalism, “‘If you disagree with me, you do so at your own peril,’ wrote Trip Hawkins, president of the now defunct game publisher 3DO, in an e-mail to the editors of GamePro magazine in 2001, ‘....And do not patronize me by telling me the reader is the customer – your real customer is the one that pays you your revenue. And it is game industry advertisers.’” Ashley and Elliot (2009) claim this quote is indicative of how most game companies view game journalists; the game studios have all of the power in the relationship and journalists are trampled on.

Many game companies attempt to exert control over game journalists by using what Ashley and Elliot (2009) call “carrots and sticks.” The carrot refers to methods that can be seen as a gift and beneficial to both parties, like an exclusive. In exchange for giving a journalist the first access to information, interviews, video, and screenshots of an upcoming title, a game will receive positive coverage and prime placement in the site or magazine. The stick refers to methods of control through punishment, like blackballing. When a news outlet is blackballed, it is essentially cut off from all information from a game company. In a market with so many sources of information, being the one site without information on a big title can be devastating to a gaming news organization. An organization has only to commit offenses like giving a bad

review, investigating a possible story that was not initiated by the game company, or releasing early information about a game to receive the blackball sentence (Ashley & Elliot, 2009).

Game journalists and industry insiders have started to talk openly about the tactics game studios use to control game journalists. Chris Buffa (2006), a video game journalist, claims that many of his fellow journalists and their respective outlets knowingly mislead the public, take bribes, and are just bad journalists. He claims that much of these problems arise from the relationship game journalists and editors have with game company public relations workers. Instead of taking what game studios say under advisement, Buffa claims that many game journalists just write what they are told (Buffa, 2006). In April, 2010, Toby McCasker, an editor for *Zoo Weekly*, claimed that Rockstar Games pressured him to give their game, *Red Dead Redemption*, favorable coverage (Ramadge, 2010). *Zoo Weekly* fired McCasker who claimed on his Facebook page that he was let go from the magazine because he publicly attacked how game companies influence the industry media. McCasker called the game media a “cash for comment” culture of the industry and said that he had not become a journalist to write advertorials disguised as editorials.

Not everyone sees the relationship between game journalism and game companies as problematic. Freelance writer Justin Hall (2003) states that no ethical lines are crossed in the interactions of the game producers and game reporters. Most journalists, Hall writes, have no direct interaction with the public relations workers of game companies and have no first hand exposure to PR efforts of the studios. Hall claims that the game studio PR efforts are filtered through the news editor and this separation prevents the journalists’ work from being easily influenced by the game companies. Hall also argues that the watchful eyes of consumers prevent

any type of shady dealings from occurring. He states that consumers would notice if gaming news sources were giving favorable reviews to bad products and take their business elsewhere.

Justification for Study

An examination into video game journalism is important because it is such a young form of media and is still developing an identity. Being as relatively young as it is when compared to the news media, consumers of video game news need to know if what they are reading is objective information from journalists or lines given by game company.

The news media follows a set of norms and routines that when followed give the media a certain degree of legitimacy. It has yet to be determined what norms and routines video game journalists follow and therefore what faith consumers can reasonably have in it. Video game journalists largely consider themselves to be journalists but no research exists to determine if video game journalism adheres to the same norms as news journalism. If in fact video game journalism does not follow the same norms and routines as the news media then it should not enjoy the same reputation and trust that consumers have in the news media. Since no research of this type exists, this paper will examine how closely video game journalists follow the norms and routines of journalism and if game journalists are influenced by exterior public relations.

From a mass communication perspective, it is an interesting time in video games. Video games are a relatively young medium and are just now experiencing what other forms of media have already been through, things that are taught as media history. Similar to comic books in the 1940's and 50's, Elvis Presley in the 1950's, and popular music in the 1980's, video games have been blamed for causing a litany of societal problems (Jorgensen, 1998; *"Good Shall Triumph over Evil": The Comic Book Code of 1954*, n.d.; *Music Censorship in America*, n.d.; Benedetti, 2007; Jack Thompson: *Proposal is needed to prevent a Louisiana 'Columbine'*, 2006). Also, like

other forms of media before it, the video game industry is going through the process of self-regulation in an effort to stave off government oversight. Movies, comics, and music have all been through the same battles to maintain self-regulation. The movie industry adopted the Hays Code in 1930, the comic book industry adopted The Code in 1954, and the music industry agreed to the use of a parental advisory sticker in 1985, all to keep the government from regulating them (*The Hays Code*, n.d.; “*Good Shall Triumph over Evil*”: *The Comic Book Code of 1954*, n.d.; *Parental Advisory*, n.d.). Studying the video game industry and the media associated with it is an opportunity to study what is considered to be crucial periods in the history of older media as it happens.

Another reason that research into video games is important is it is such an economically large industry. In 2008, video game software sales grew 22.9 percent to sell \$11.7 billion in the U.S. alone (*Industry Facts*, 2010). In the last thirty years, video games have become a major mass medium that competes with other media for consumers’ money, consumers’ time, and corporate advertising dollars. In 2003, television consumption by males between ages 8 and 34 dropped 7 percent, a figure directly attributed to increased time playing video games (Yi, 2005). The advent of video games has attracted the attention of many advertisers who see video games as a way to reach specific markets through interactive advertising. In 2008, advertisers spent a reported \$823 million to advertise in video games (McWhertor, 2009).

A Brief History of Gaming

Video games have been around since Willy Higinbotham invented an electronic table-tennis game on an oscilloscope in 1958 for he and his friends to play (Herman, Horwitz, & Miller, n.d.). Few people in the general public ever even got a chance to see or play this early game. Not many advancements were made in video games until 1972, when Nolan Bushnell and

Ted Dabney founded a company called Atari. Bushnell and Dabney released a game called pong, an update to Higinbotham's table-tennis game that the two men set in arcade machines. That same year, Magnavox released the first home video game system. After the release of Pong, gaming continued to gain popularity with releases like Space Invaders and Space Wars. However, it was not until Pac-Man was released in 1979 that the video game industry started to take off (Long, 2007). Pac-Man became the first mascot for the game industry that everyone recognized and a game that was accessible to all. In total, Pac-Man sold more than 300,000 units worldwide (Herman, Horwitz, & Miller, n.d.).

Seeing the success of Pac-Man, lots of other companies decided to enter the home video game business successfully saturating the market by 1982 (Herman, Horwitz, & Miller, n.d.). Cheap consoles, cheap games, knockoff copies of successful brands, and terrible games rushed through production flooded the market. The influx of cheap products caused consumers to lose faith in the product resulting in an industry wide crash in 1983. The most prolific example of bad software to contribute to the industry crash was E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial released on the Atari in 1982 (Player 3 Stage 6: The great videogame crash, n.d.). In an attempt to cash in on what was at that time the highest grossing movie of all time, Atari allowed the game producer only five weeks to design, produce, and test the game in order to have it on shelves for the 1982 Christmas season. A development team of any size would have trouble with this timeframe, let alone the one person assigned to do everything. The game was shipped and consumers hated it. It did not work well, confused consumers, and was simply not fun. Atari was forced to dump millions of unsold cartridges into a New Mexico landfill (Player 3 Stage 6: The great videogame crash, n.d.).

It wasn't until 1986 when the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) released in the United States that the industry began to rebound. Retailers were still so weary of video games

after the industry crash in 1983 that Nintendo had to agree to buy back any unsold inventory to get retailers to carry their products. Nintendo was spared from having to buy back their consoles or games as the NES was instantly successful, outselling its competitors 10 to 1. In 1989, Nintendo extended its lead over its competitors with the release of the Game Boy, a handheld portable gaming device. The only real competition Nintendo had at this time was Sega. Nintendo and Sega would continue to battle for dominance in the home gaming industry until 1995, when Sony releases the Playstation. The Playstation was wildly successful, becoming the first console to sell over 100 million units, only later to be surpassed by the Playstation 2 (PS2 hits 100 million mark, 2005).

In 2001, software giant Microsoft released the Xbox console. Around this time Sega decided to discontinue the production of consoles and focus on creating software. 2006 ushered in the current generation of consoles known as Seventh Generation Gaming Consoles consisting of the Xbox 360, the Playstation 3, and the Nintendo Wii (Sakazaki, 2006).

Public Relations and Video Game Journalism

Like public relations in any other industry, a main role of a game companies PR worker is to get the public interested in their products (Brownell, 2005). Video game PR workers often work with game journalists and news journalists, organize and attend trade shows, maintain an online presence, and do marketing work (Brownell, 2005). PR workers will often speak to anyone that a gamer might listen to for information about video games (Radd, 2006). Video game PR workers employ a wide range of tactics in their daily activities like distributing screen shots of upcoming games, distribute copies of games to be reviewed, give out swag or promotional gifts, pitch stories to various news outlets, bloggers, webcomic artists, and web-TV programs, and even what is known as “real life swag” (Brownell, 2005; Radd, 2006). Real life

swag is when several journalists are invited on trips to participate in adventures related to a particular game. These adventures can include things like going to a driving course to learn how to knock other drivers off of the road for a Grand Theft Auto promotion (Brownell, 2005).

Game Media Today

A gamer is any person who plays electronic games and when a gamer plays these games, it is often referred to as gaming (*Gamer*, n.d.). In the growing world of video games, many specialized media outlets dedicated solely to video games exist to help gamers navigate through the market. Magazines like *Gameinformer*, websites like *Kotaku.com*, and television shows like G4's *Attack of the Show* help gamers stay informed of the latest games and what is happening in the gaming world. These media outlets comprise what is known as video game journalism. Though popular, these video game media sources are not the only place for consumers to acquire information about the industry. Traditional news sources like newspapers will occasionally run reviews for big titles or run a story about major industry news. Peer to peer communication is another valuable source of information for gamers about games but not a good source for information about industry news. The video game media is usually the best source for advanced information about industry news, reviews for games that are not blockbusters, and general gaming news.

Academic research of video games began in earnest in the early 1980's. The vast majority of the peer-reviewed research on video games to date focuses on the effects that video games have on people. Specifically, a lot of effort has been put into finding what the effects of playing violent video games are in children. With so much concentration on video game effects research, little to no scholarly research has been done on the topic of video game journalism. This study examines whether game journalists are influenced by the public relations efforts of

game companies and if video game journalism follows the same standards used to determine the quality of mainstream news media in the United States. Specifically, this study will examine video game journalists from video game sites and journalists from mainstream news sites to see if the norms and routines of each respective group are the same as news journalists from mainstream news media.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers the established norms and routines of Western news media, prevailing theories in public relations, the public relations method, and how corporate public relations and journalism often interact.

Norms and Routines

A norm is a pressure that exists in society or social group that influences individuals to act a certain way at the risk of punishment (Axelrod, 1986). Journalism has well-established norms that help guide journalists' actions (Gilligan, 2006). Media norms are identical for all news organizations, regardless of medium. Journalistic norms and routines are not laws and do not necessarily have to be followed though they are encouraged. Norms are reinforced in three ways, expectations, values, and behaviors (Axelrod, 1986). The encouragement to follow norms comes from editors and fellow journalists (Gilligan, 2006). Expectations of journalists such as story length and story structure are often passed down from older editors and reporters to young journalists on the job, journalists often learn values from interaction with other journalists, and behaviors are established when new journalists observe veteran reporters at work (Gilligan, 2006).

There are nine established norms in Western journalism: news value, objectivity, balance and fairness, professionalism, watchdog role, enduring values, style and format, scoop, and professional cooperation (Gilligan, 2006). The first norm, news values, is a norm that helps journalists decide what information is actually news. Factors when considering news values are prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, issues/trend, and entertainment/novelty.

Objectivity is a media norm stating that journalists should just report the facts of a story rather than interjecting their personal views into the news. In journalism, objectivity is also the protection of their work by a writer from outside influence (Schudson, 2001). Schudson wrote:

Nothing was more threatening to this ideal than the work of public relations, ‘Many reporters today are little more than intellectual mendicants’, complained political agent or press bureau to another seeking ‘handouts’ (Schudson, 2001).

The idea of public relations affecting objectivity reverberates in Buffa’s claim that the game journalists were under the control of the video game companies as Buffa described them (Buffa, 2006). While not entirely ignoring the concept of objectivity as it relates to a journalist interjecting his own opinions into a story, this study focused on viewing idea of objectivity through the lens of how game companies PR efforts affect journalists’ writings. The norm of balance and fairness dictate that a media outlet should report both sides of an issue equally. Objectivity is widely considered impossible in journalism because reporting is done by humans and humans cannot be totally objective (Applegate, 2007). As a result, when journalists talk about objectivity they often are referring to balance and fairness. Shaw et al. write:

When writing a story, journalists often balance the opposing sides of an issue as if their story is the only one that the public will see. Journalists do this because they want to be objective, or if that seems impossible, to be fair and balanced. This is true even though most journalists and editors have concluded that objectivity is impossible and, like magazine magnate Henry Luce, know they can only aim for fairness. Fairness and objectivity go together. Scholar Jay Rosen writes: “Objectivity is about informing the public; it tells us to worry about things like accuracy, balance and fairness” (Shaw, McCombs et al., 1997).

Professionalism is the idea that a journalist should have standardized goals and not be under the influence of any outside group. The news media has the unofficial role of watchdog over the government, meaning journalists are supposed to check what politicians and government entities say and do for truthfulness and legitimacy. Enduring values are values that help guide journalists when constructing articles. Values include ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible

capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership. The style and format with which journalists present the news is another journalistic norm. This style includes story layout, brevity, and understanding. The norm of professional competition is the understanding that journalists try to get the scoop or be the first ones to cover a story. Finally, journalists are expected to cooperate on a minor scale with each other, providing things like dates and correct spelling of names.

Table 1.

Norms and Definitions

Norms	
Norms	Definition
News Value	How to determine what is considered news. Values include prominence, proximity, timelines, conflict, news-you-can-use, issues/trend, and entertainment/novelty.
Objectivity	When reporters present information based on fact and not subjective ideas.
Balance and Fairness	Representing all the major sides of an issue.
Professionalism	Standardized goals of journalists
Watchdog Role	Obligation to watch out for society
Enduring Values	Values that help guide journalists when constructing articles. Values include ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership.
Style and Format	How a writer composes a story. Brevity and understanding are important factors in this norm.
Scoop	Competition produce a story first
Professional Cooperation	Sharing between journalists of easy to obtain information

News work often consists of dealing with events that news workers are not aware of until they happen (Tuchman, 1973). In order to receive and process the unexpected information and

then produce news, news organizations use routines. Routines are used to help journalists meet the journalistic norms (Gilligan, 2006). Within these routines, news workers make categories of possible news events. These categories are hard news, soft news, spot news, developing news, and continuing news (Tuchman, 1973). Each of these categories has an existing structure that helps journalists process information and provide a template to help news workers react to the event in a timely manner. When an event occurs, a news worker places that event into a category and follows the preordained plan. Molotch and Lester (1974) state that the role of the media in the West is to objectively reflect important events in the world. Promoters, people who make events available to others, attempt to influence the routines and final news products of news organizations. Promoters can influence news workers with tactics like advertising boycotts or advertising awards. Eliasoph (1988) argues that as long as routines exist in news organizations then news workers will be susceptible to outside influence. Reliance on officials for information and having to fill the news hole are some news routines that allow news workers to be swayed.

If journalists do not adhere to these norms and routines it does not necessarily mean that they are not ethical journalists. The established norms of journalism are not ethical guidelines for journalists. In 1928, the American Society of Newspaper Editors established a code of ethics containing seven canons for journalists to follow (*Canons of Journalism*, 2003). While journalistic norms are not ethical guidelines for journalists, some of the norms do overlap with the codes of ethics. The seven canons of ethics in journalism are responsibility, freedom of the press, independence, impartiality, fair play, decency, and sincerity, truthfulness, and accuracy.

Responsibility refers to the obligation of the media to be conscious of the public welfare when attracting and informing the public in which it exists. Freedom of the press observes that the press requires freedom to be effective and that members of the press should be vigilant to

protect this freedom. Independence is the idea that journalists should not promote any private interest that does not help the public. Impartiality means that news reports should be free of bias and distinctions be made between news reports and opinion pieces. Fair play in journalism is the obligation to give all involved parties a chance to be heard and that any mistakes should be corrected. The canon of decency refers to the media's obligation to not glorify or encourage poor behavior. Sincerity, truthfulness, and accuracy mean that all media should be as accurate as possible in their reporting and as thorough as possible in their efforts to produce the truth.

As noted in the introduction, many accounts exist of video game journalists being influenced by the public relations efforts of game companies. According to many video game journalists, the influence exerted by public relations practitioners extends to the point of dictating what journalists write, not just what they write about. If this is true, the media norms of objectivity, professionalism, and their role as watchdog are all in jeopardy.

Public Relations Theory

Persuasion in public relations is the attempt to sway perception and behavior in an external public (Pfau & Hua-Hsin, 2006). Since the study of public relations began, many different communication models were adopted as the most efficient way of communicating with the public. One early communication model was press agency. Press agency was basically a model where the goal of communication is to advance the organization while not receiving any feedback from the public and holding little regard for the public (Pfau & Hua-Hsin, 2006). More recently, PR has embraced what James E. Grunig called the two-way symmetrical model. This model downplays the persuasion aspect of PR and states that in order to have effective communications, both the organization and the public need to communicate equally and both parties need to accommodate each other in an effort to reach a common goal (Pfau & Hua-Hsin,

2006). Grunig's two-way symmetrical model has been criticized for not being realistic, saying that the model presumes goal compatibility and an even playing field between organizations and their publics (Pfau & Hua-Hsin, 2006). Many public relations practitioners have adopted the idea that there is no single, correct way to communicate with publics. Many believe that a plan must be developed for each situation where organizations choosing a communication plan somewhere between pure advocacy for themselves and pure accommodation with the public (Pfau & Hua-Hsin, 2006).

The Public Relations Model

Instead of using norms and routines as seen in journalism, public relations practitioners use different PR processes to guide their work. One such process is known as the ROPES method, which is an acronym for research, objectives, programming, evaluate, and stewardship (Swann, 2008). The role of the ROPES method is to guide PR practitioners when they are designing and implementing strategies and tactics for a PR campaign. The model does not explicitly tell practitioners what to do in their campaigns; rather it provides a framework for practitioners to employ their tactics. It is important to examine the ROPES method because unlike journalism, public relations does not have a recognized list of norms and routines. PR is mostly constrained by ethics, laws, taste, money, and the creativity of its practitioners. The ROPES method is one of the few established guidelines used in PR.

The research stage of the ROPES method is where practitioners conduct background work on the issue at hand and identify the problem or problems. During the objectives stage, practitioners develop set goals and decide what they want the final outcome to be. Programming refers to the development of a strategy to meet the aforementioned goals and figure out tactics to implement the strategy. Once the public relations campaign is completed, practitioners will

evaluate the campaign. During this stage, practitioners examine whether the goals were met, if the strategies and tactics proved useful, and see what can be improved on. The final stage, stewardship, is the active upkeep with any media or publics encountered during the campaign to ensure a beneficial relationship for the future.

Relationship Between Public Relations and Journalism

The press and public relations practitioners often must work with each other to meet their goals. Journalists want information to write articles about that the public will read and PR agents want their information told to the public. While these goals do not always coincide with each other, it is possible for a mutually beneficial relationship to exist between a PR practitioner and a journalist.

There are however, many cases where one of the parties attempts to gain control over the other for their own benefit. One way this is done is known as access journalism, a term used to describe when journalists are coerced in altering their work by an outside entity (*Access Journalism & Self Censorship, n.d.*). Journalists can be pressured by threats to withhold advertising dollars, not receiving advanced copies of products to review, or by simply withholding information. Access journalism is a method used to try and control the media.

Video game journalists are not the only journalists having to deal with corporate PR pressure. In early 2010, the technology website Gizmodo.com, gained access to an early version of the iPhone 4 months before it was released to the public (Johnson, 2010). The early version of the phone was attained after an Apple employee left it at a bar one night. Not only did Apple take legal action but they also used their public relations department to try and prevent the site from releasing any information about the phone. As it turns out, Apple will use PR practices like withholding test products and removing advertising from offending sites when attempting to

exert control over the media (Johnson, 2010). Apple has used these tactics for offenses like giving bad reviews to their products or discussing the health of Steve Jobs, Apple CEO (Johnson, 2010).

Unlike news, tech, or game journalists, automotive journalists seem to enjoy significant power over their corporate counterparts. These journalists are able to demand advanced cars to drive around in, to the point where many automotive journalists do not even own cars (Baruth, 2010). Even when caught abusing the loaned vehicles, there are no consequences. Many automotive journalists feel that they are too specialized and know too much about vehicles for any person off the street to replace them (Baruth, 2010). Baruth claims that if car reviews are left to bloggers and not automotive journalists then the reviews will either all be bad or just praising the cars whereas automotive journalists will give actual information. This fact puts automotive journalists in a position to make demands on car companies.

Journalists and public relations practitioners each have their own goals when working and to meet these goals they often have to work with the other. While it is possible to have a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties get what they need, this is not always the case. The balance of power between journalists and PR workers shifts depending on the situation. As seen in the Gizmodo.com case, Apple PR agents held a lot of power over the reporters who wrote about their products. There are also occasions when reporters have more power in a relationship with a company or industry as seen in the automotive reporter example. This study attempts to explore what effects corporate public relations efforts have on video game journalism and how those effects are different than the effects of mainstream news sources.

Research Questions

RQ 1. Do video game journalists follow the same norms and routines that mainstream news journalists do?

RQ 2. How do corporate public relations efforts affect video game journalists' work?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative research arose from the interpretive paradigm, the aim of which was to study people and events in their natural settings to gain an understanding of them (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). There are several qualities that define qualitative research and set it apart from quantitative research. In the qualitative research method, the researcher is an important part of the data. The involvement of the researcher during the data collection process helps define what the resulting data will be. Unlike quantitative research, the design of a study is not static (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The setting of qualitative research is also important. Ideally, researchers want to conduct studies and observe participants in their natural surroundings with less control of possible variables. A qualitative researcher, unlike a quantitative researcher, is the measurement instrument when collecting and analyzing data. Unlike in quantitative research, a qualitative researcher cannot hand off the data to another researcher to be analyzed because the measurement of the collected data is specific to each individual. Finally, qualitative researchers use data they collect to build theory as research progress. Where quantitative researchers use data to test, support, or reject theories, qualitative researchers analyze data and use it to evolve their theories as research progresses.

In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interview is a data collection technique commonly used in qualitative research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). In-depth interviews are one-on-one interactions between a researcher and a participant who is a source of data for the research. This research type tends to use small samples because of the time required to conduct each interview and then analyze the data. Open-ended questions provide a great deal of detail about the data. When using in-depth

interviews, each interview can be personalized depending the participant or setting. The researcher can also change each interview as they progress. Interviewers are able to respond to answers during the data collection process and develop new questions based on previous data. In-depth interviews were ideal for this research for several reasons: since there was little previous research on this topic, any expectations the researcher had before conducting the study was largely speculative, speaking with each participant provided the researcher with information about video game journalism, it allowed the journalists to expound on their answers, and it allowed the researcher to alter his questions as he interviewed each participant.

In-depth interviews were conducted over the phone and by email. The phone interviews were arranged by email for times that were most convenient for each participant in an attempt to attract more participants. The researcher contacted journalists from the mainstream news media who wrote about video games and journalists from the video game news media to participate in the study. The researcher attempted to contact twenty-nine different video game journalists to participate in the study, six of whom agreed to be interviewed for this study. The mainstream news journalists were selected by conducting a LexisNexis Academic search, determining the largest national newspapers in the United States which had at least five articles about video games written by the same journalist, and then proceeding down the list of journalists. The researcher looked on LexisNexis for stories containing the term “video game” and then looked under the newspaper heading. The researcher then tabulated the results by the author of each article to see which journalist wrote the most stories about video games for each newspaper. Only two journalists from the mainstream news publications agreed to interviews.

The video game journalists were selected by first searching for “video game websites” on google.com. This search brought the researcher to the website ebizma.com that listed the fifteen

most popular video game websites as determined by site traffic each month. The researcher used sites from this list to locate journalists from video game news sites. Once the sites were determined, the researcher sought out journalists who wrote about industry news and who were paid employees of the sites.

The interviews consisted of nineteen open-ended questions. Three journalists were interviewed over the phone and three requested the interview questions be sent to them by email. Each phone interview lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. These conversations were recorded on a digital recording device and transcribed at a later time.

The interview question (see Appendix A) asked the participants about their work history, the topics they were currently reporting on, whether they followed the journalistic norms and routines, their experience with video game company public relations efforts, their thoughts on the standards of video game journalism, and how they felt about the current status of video game journalism.

The participants were not asked about the enduring values norm during the interview because of the political nature of the norm and the length of the in-depth interview. The eight enduring values that comprise the norm are all geared towards political journalism. The eight values are altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, ethnocentrism, individualism, national leadership, small-town pastoralism, moderatism, and social order. Altruistic democracy is advocating support of the government in the news, responsible capitalism refers to journalists not promote an economic system besides capitalism, ethnocentrism is reporting from the standpoint that the writers' culture or ethnicity is paramount, individualism is the tendency to focus on single people when reporting and not the group they belong to, national leadership is the tendency of the press to seek out political leaders for sources and giving their words weight,

small-town pastoralism and moderatism are encouragement by the press for people to promote a simpler way of life, social order is the support of national and societal values by the press (Gilligan, 2006). Video game journalism is a specialized type of journalism that would not encounter these values when reporting on the video game industry. The lack of political reporting by game journalists and the large number of questions in the interview resulted in this norm not being included in the study.

Each participant worked for a different media outlet and their main jobs at those outlets was to cover video games or the video game industry. To protect the identities of the participants, each were assigned an alias to be used in the study.

During the interviews the researcher did not account for possible social desirability bias in the participants' answers. Social desirability is a tendency by people being interviewed to answer in a way that will make them look good in the eyes of the interviewer (Frederiksen, 1965). As seen in the introduction, game journalism has been heavily criticized in the recent years for being influenced by video game companies (Buffa, 2006; Ramadge, 2010). Past criticisms like this could have potentially encouraged respondents to answer questions about their relationships with game studio PR agents differently than they really were. This research did not conduct a content analysis of the respondents work or interview public relations workers from game companies to check the accuracy of responses. The researcher attempted to mitigate this possible effect by asking broad questions about the interaction with external PR agents and not explicitly mentioning the past criticisms.

Although the study only had six participants the results are reliable for two reasons. The data is supported by the fact that all responses given by the participants were in a tight cluster with very few outliers. All of the journalists stated that though they might not follow every norm,

they do adhere to most of them, they all had routines when creating a story, and they all claimed that the companies they report on had no influence on what they wrote. The legitimacy of the findings were further supported by the fact that all of the respondents worked for different news outlets, two of which were national newspapers, and the responses still formed a tight cluster.

Coding

To code the data from the interviews, the researcher used a constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onweugbuzie, 2007). The analysis of the data for the first research question was done inductively, where codes are identified before the data is collected and then looked for afterwards (Leech & Onweugbuzie, 2007). Codes were assigned to each norm prior to the interviews with a specific question asked for each norm. A similar specific question was asked for routines. After conducting each interview the data was grouped by similar response clusters for each question. Responses where journalists said that they followed a norm or routine were coded together as were responses if a norm or routine was not followed. Each norm was coded as a subset by positive or negative where each subset was analyzed together to decide if the game journalists followed news journalism norms and routines. An example of this would be the norm of the press serving as a watchdog. Each participant was asked if video game journalists served a watchdog role over the video game industry. All of the answers saying that they did serve as watchdogs were grouped together as were the answers saying that they did not serve that role. These responses indicated whether they did or did not fill a watchdog role over the industry. The coding for this one answer was then analyzed with the responses from the other questions about norms to decide if video game journalists follow the norms of news journalism.

The coding for the second research question was done abductively (Leech & Onweugbuzie, 2007). The researcher asked the journalists an array of questions about their

interactions with game company PR agents. Journalists answered questions about rules their employers had about interacting with game company PR workers, any rules the journalists themselves had, whether they were mindful of their relationship with game companies when writing about them, if outside forces ever tried to influence their writing, and if they ever changed a story because of outside pressure. Two themes emerged during the interviews and responses were then grouped together as they related to these themes. The responses to the two themes of why the journalists were able to withstand influence and whether a journalists' relationship with a company affected their writing were then used to answer second research question.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative study sought to determine whether video game journalists value the same norms as hard news journalists do, what effect external corporate public relations have on video game journalists and how these journalists change their work in response to public relations efforts. To understand how video game journalists work, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with journalists across the United States who covered the video game industry.

Table 2.

Participants

Participants				
Alias	Title	Type of Outlet	Gender	Experience
James McCoury	Home Technology Reporter	Major National Newspaper	Male	Local and National Newspapers
Suzanne Byrne	Digital Entertainment and Technology Reporter	Major National Newspaper	Female	Local and National Newspapers
Steve Hoon	Contributing Editor	Video Game News Site	Male	Local Newspapers and Video Game Websites
Mike Garcia	News Editor	Video Game News Site	Male	Television News and Video Game Websites
Robert Haynes	Freelance Writer	Various	Male	Local Newspapers and Video Game Websites
Lauren Callaway	News Director	Video Game News Site	Female	Video Games

Profile of Participants

The six journalists who agreed to participate in the study worked at various media outlets across the country and held different positions in their respective organizations. Two of the participants wrote for major national newspapers and four worked for online video game sites. Each journalist had previous experience at other news outlets prior to their current jobs.

The name of each journalist was changed and assigned an alias to ensure their anonymity.

- **RQ 1. Do video game journalists follow the same norms and routines that mainstream news journalists do?**

The results for the first research question are given in two sections. The first section is grouped by the norms of journalism and the second addresses the participants' routines.

Norms

Factors When Considering News Values

All of the journalists who participated mentioned at least one factor as being important to them when considering news values. Three of the six participants stated that all of the traditional factors influenced their decision process when deciding what was news. Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes believed prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, and novelty all played important roles when they were deciding what was news for their readers at one time or another. "Yeah, that's all journalism, that's all media. All media pretty much works on those fundamentals of timeliness, proximity, and all that type of stuff," said Hoon. When asked if she thought the news values affected what she wrote about, Callaway said, "Absolutely. My job is to inform and engage my audience, and when something isn't poignant or relevant or current it's not very useful. Everything needs a purpose." None of these three journalists stated that one factor was more important than any other.

Three of the journalists did not mention prominence and proximity during the interviews. The three that did not mention these two factors were McCoury, Byrnes, and Garcia. They did not say that they were not important but rather focused on other factors as being the most important to them when writing. Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes included prominence and proximity when they said all factors were important.

On the factor of timeliness, McCoury, Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes all stated that it was something that helped them decide what was news. McCoury believed that timeliness helped make the story more relevant to the public. “Timeliness and novelty can always help a story run sooner or gain prominence,” he said. The other two journalists did not mention the norm.

Five of the six journalists who participated in the research mentioned conflict. Three of the journalists, Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes, said they felt conflict was just as important as any other factor.

Byrne and Garcia both felt that while conflict was important, it could also be dangerous for a journalist. They believed that journalists should always be wary of how they use conflict in a story. Byrne thought that while conflict helped attract readers, it could also be dangerous if a journalist used it to make a story more dramatic than it really was. She explained:

You think that your story might need edge so you think, ‘God, I got to have conflict in there’, and that’s where you go that slippery slope of temptation and you make things more dramatic than it really is (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

Byrne felt that if a writer were to enhance the dramatic nature of a story for the sake of making it more interesting then it could result in that journalist losing credibility. Garcia, like Byrne, believed that an abuse of conflict in a story was detrimental to the news outlet. Garcia stated that his company tried to avoid any tabloid style story. Instead of trying to watch for it on a case-by-case basis, Garcia said that his company tried to avoid certain types of stories that could generate unnecessary conflict, saying:

We try to avoid tabloid style news. Some other publications will report stories like, ‘man convicted of robbing Xbox’ sentences. It will be like reading police blotters or whatever to get those sort of stories. We avoid most of those tabloid stories. We try to focus specifically on news directly related to games or game players and avoid rumors we don’t feel are substantiated by anyone we trust (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

McCoury, alongside Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes, mentioned news-you-can-use specifically. While he did consider it somewhat important when deciding what was news, he did not feel that it was quite as important as other factors. If he believed that a story was relevant to his readers by sake of news-you-can-use alone and he had another article that was conflict driven then the story containing conflict would take precedence. “News-you-can-use is important, but may have a more vague time peg, so it could hold a day or two, in comparison to other stories,” said McCoury. Byrne and Garcia did not mention news-you-can-use as an important factor for newsworthiness.

Garcia was the only journalist to mention trend specifically. He attributed trends in the game industry and in the entertainment industry as his main focus when deciding what to write about. Garcia stated:

I come up with most of my own ideas based on what is happening in the video game industry or what trends are happening in entertainment. Occasionally, a trend breaks like a viral video or song (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

Though Garcia was the only participant to mention trend specifically, Hoon, Callaway, and Haynes indirectly said that trend was a factor when they were deciding what to write about as they said that all the traditional factors for newsworthiness played a role. Byrne and McCoury did not mention trend.

Novelty was the only factor that any journalist specifically mentioned that they tried to avoid as a news value. In his interview, Garcia said that he tried to use novelty driven articles sparingly. He believed that his audience was more interested in relevant news about the video game industry than they were about novelty news articles. Garcia conceded the fact that he would run novelty driven articles occasionally because sometimes that was just what his readers wanted.

McCoury, on the other hand, considered novelty to be important because it could increase the chances that a story was run at his publication. Three other journalists agreed that novelty was important as they said they considered all factors when deciding the news value of a story. Only one participant did not specifically mention novelty.

Objectivity

All participating journalists felt that objectivity was important in their work. Although all journalists stated that it was important to be objective when writing, they all felt that parts of the game journalism industry were not objective. Two journalists who were interviewed said even those journalists who wrote on the news side of game journalism faced challenges with objectivity because of the light hearted nature of the industry and their personal relationship with the product.

McCoury, Byrne, Hoon, and Callaway all felt they were able to remain objective when writing. McCoury considered objectivity to be important and key to his credibility as a journalist. “Of course, you must remain objective. If not, your readers won’t trust your opinion. Lose that and you’ve lost your credibility,” said McCoury. Byrne, Hoon, and Callaway all said they, as news writers, were objective in their work but objectivity is not easily obtained for game reviewers.

Four participants attributed this lack of objectivity in the industry to the two different types of game journalists, those who wrote about the news and those who reviewed games. The respondents felt that game reviewers, by nature, had a harder time being objective as they were giving their personal views on a product though some said that being a reviewer did not preclude them from being objective. Hoon stated that he did not review games because that would affect

his objectivity as a news writer. Byrne cited similar reason as to why she did not review games, saying:

I don't do reviews. It's an old school rule in the industry that if you write about an industry that you can't review its product. It's very old school. I don't know how long this will last but you're supposed to be able, if you report about it, you're supposed to be objective about it and not play favorites and if you start reviewing then you start revealing your biases (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

Callaway stated that she did not do reviews either. She too said that it was impossible to be objective when reviewing games but did not explicitly say that doing both would affect her objectivity as a news writer as Byrne did. Rather, Callaway stated that she wanted to be an objective writer and therefore avoided reviewing games, stating:

It depends on what you're writing. Objectivity is essential to journalism – it's about facts, not my personal opinion or speculation. But I think there's a lot of value in personal experience when writing criticism, since games are experiential. I do place a lot of focus on being free from outside influence whether I am writing from a place of critical opinion or of objective fact. I think an objective game review is impossible; part of the reason I no longer write reviews in a traditional format is because of the odd expectation that such a complex entertainment medium can somehow be evaluated against ill-defined metrics as a traditional 'product' (personal communication, September 23, 2010).

McCoury, however, felt it was possible to be objective as a game reviewer. He believed that although it was possible for a reviewer to be influenced due to receiving free games to review from game studios that this practice happened everywhere so there would be no undue influence anywhere. This research did not include interviews with game reviewers so it is not known if their feelings on objectivity correspond with the news journalists' opinions.

Garcia, while himself adhering strictly to objectivity, believed that in the game journalism industry, the lines of objectivity were not as clear-cut as in hard news journalism. "Yeah, I'm very much for objectivity," said Garcia. He did admit that his news outlet was still trying to find a balance between objectivity and injecting personality into an article. Although he

said there was a conflict between objectivity and personality in stories, the two things were not mutually exclusive in an article. Garcia stated:

Personally, I am pretty strictly opposed to putting any opinion into an article that is in a section called news. I guess I am sort of old fashioned in that way. I think of news as being an objective report on facts. But that said, If you can cross that fine line and have personality without having opinion, without specifically stating an opinion then I'm all for that (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

Similar to Garcia, Haynes said that objectivity was possible but difficult in game journalism. He considered objectivity in the gaming industry to be a funny thing. Haynes said:

Game journalism was largely considered enthusiast press. People covering the industry mostly did so because they absolutely love games and things that relate to games. There are certainly many game journalists who approach the subjects they're writing about in an objective way, it's hard to really call what we do entirely objective (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

Balance and Fairness

All of the journalists interviewed for this study believed that balance was important in video game journalism. Most of the participants believed that they did a good job of offering balance in their stories though some found it challenging at times. The common reasons the game journalists deemed balance to be so crucial was they felt it enhanced the quality their stories and it helped maintain their credibility. Byrne's main goal, in relation to balance, was to give readers all of the pertinent information available so they could make informed decisions on their own. Byrne stated:

Balance is really important because what you want to do is you want to give people your main objective and to give people a full picture of what happened so they can walk away with, so two readers can read it and walk away with completely different but informed conclusions (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

Some journalists believed having balance in articles did more than make a story better. Hoon stated, "So for me if I'm not following up with these people then that hurts my reputation and they're not going to pick up the phone if I try to call them." He thought balance helped their

credibility with others in the industry, which in turn opened avenues of information within the industry for them.

Although he thought there were some gaming sites that sufficiently sought balance, Haynes felt that much of the game journalist outlets did a poor job of showing balance. He believed the lack of balance to be derived from the light-hearted nature of the gaming press. Haynes stated:

With the rise of big gaming blogs like Kotaku and Joystiq that take a more loose and lighthearted approach to news, it seems a lot of gaming outlets have followed suit by posting short daily 'news' bits that are often just regurgitated and re-written blurbs of reporting done by other sites (and press releases). Often lacking original reporting, these lazy posts are often rife with personal opinion and commentary. As interesting as they are to read and as informative as they may be, it's a far cry from traditional, balanced news (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

Professionalism

The journalists were unanimous in saying that they were never influenced by a source outside of their company into changing the focus of their articles. If any changes were made, it entailed formatting changes in the editorial process or if a factual error had been made. Only one journalist said that she had ever even been pressured to change an article by an outside source. McCoury and Hoon both stated that editors sometimes made changes to their work. Hoon explained that this was the natural process of news writing, saying:

That's part of the conversation process. My original works are changed all the time. That happens at every newspaper, that happens everywhere. That's what a copyeditor does. They will change things to fit the structure of the outlet (personal communication, September 8, 2010).

Garcia said that he would not change a story due to outside pressure but would correct a factual error in his work. Garcia stated:

Like I get a fact wrong, yeah, I change stories. Certain factual changes and we try and be transparent as far as, we put on the bottom of the story what was edited and why (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

McCoury and Byrne explained that they were able to avoid any sort of undue outside pressure because they did not accept any sort of trip or gift from an outside source. Avoiding a press junket paid for by a game company or any sort of gift, they said, would not put them in a position to owe anyone anything.

Haynes said that by explicitly stating his role as a journalist to any game company PR agent helped to avoid being pressure to alter his work. He stated:

I've had PR and industry folks ask to see a copy of my review or article before it goes to press. My reply is always: absolutely not. Usually they get it, when I explain why, but sometimes they don't. Either way, it doesn't happen too often (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

McCoury and Callaway said they had at times been limited in what topics they could discuss when conducting interviews arranged by game studio PR. However, this influence only limited what they could write about, not change what was written. Callaway explained such an experience:

A lot of times PR people will say that you can interview the person that you'd like to speak to, but they tell you what topics that person can and can't talk about. That's just the way it goes, and unfortunately you can't really do anything about that. It's important to respect the access you get; it's usually about a compromise, and clever writers can find ways to show the facts they want even if the company won't discuss them (personal communication, September 23, 2010).

Watchdog Role

The participants' views varied greatly when asked whether they served the role of watchdogs over the video game industry. Two journalists believed it was their obligation to keep an eye on the industry and actively sought to meet that obligation but only one of those felt that game journalists did a good job of it. Three of the journalists interviewed were hesitant to say that they served as watchdogs but would do so if the situation arose. One journalist stated that he did not feel being a watchdog was part of his job at all.

Haynes believed that it was the job of game journalists to serve as watchdogs over the gaming industry and that the journalists actively filled this role. Haynes was straightforward in his reasoning, saying:

The game industry is a big booming business that's full of mega corporations and bigwigs pulling strings and making decisions behind the scenes. A lot of press folks will call things out – whether it's cutting through PR bullshit, calling B.S. on a game that was totally half-assed in order to make a quick buck, or exposing other problems in the industry (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

Garcia too, believed that he and his fellow journalists should be vigilant over the game industry but unlike Haynes, he thought they fell short. He wished that game journalists as a whole could do better, but too many journalists just blindly published whatever press release was sent to them without questioning what was being said. Garcia hoped those in the gaming press would eventually do more research.

Most of the participants were wary to call themselves watchdogs but said they were not hesitant to act as watchdogs if the story presented itself. The most popular reason behind this was they felt that it implied an agenda and could affect their credibility. Byrne felt the watchdog role of a video game journalist depended on the mentality of the individual. If a journalist had a crusade mentality then that journalist would more likely be on the lookout for a story of that nature. She thought of herself more of a storyteller whose main objective was to inform the public about what was happening in the industry. “Of course, when I run across something that I think is wrong, I write about it. Its not my core-mission,” said Byrne. This meaning that would fill the watchdog role if she encountered such a story.

Like Byrne, Callaway thought that assigning herself the title of watchdog implied an agenda. Callaway said, “Being a ‘watchdog’ implies an agenda; I just report the facts and I let my audience judge whether something is appropriate or not.” Although she did would not

hesitate to write a story that could be considered a watchdog story, filling the watchdog role was not her motivating reason behind what she wrote.

The only journalist to say he did not ever fill the watchdog role of the media was Hoon. Hoon stated that he did not feel he filled a watchdog role as a game journalist but he attributed this to a desire to not get emotionally involved in a story. “For me, having covered a lot of the business things I know that I will get personally involved. Involved is not the right word. Not vested either... an emotional reaction,” said Hoon. This response indicates that it was not necessarily the role that bothered him, rather the effect it had on him.

Style and Format

No participant claimed to strictly adhere to the Associated Press style of writing articles but all six said they followed a style and format learned from years of experience. Only one of those interviewed said while not always strictly following the AP style of writing he did usually stay close to it. The other five respondents said they used varying styles and formats when crafting stories but that they were all logical article formats used in news journalism.

When writing, Hoon claimed he often followed the AP style of writing articles closely. He said whether he followed AP style or not depended on type of article he was writing. Hoon stated:

There are clearly things we do that are different from AP style but when we have to do certain nit picky things we have to go for AP style and try to keep it as structured as possible. Especially when it is something really depressing or it is business related, we’ll usually do it straight and usually when we say straight we mean AP ish style (personal communication, September 8, 2010).

The other five journalists said they followed other formats when writing, all of which were based on some sort of basic article writing format. While Byrne did follow a basic writing format she stated that there is no one-way to write a story. She said:

Every article is its own case. Certainly types of outlines that are followed and you use articles you lead with like what is happening and why it is important and the nut graph and so on and so forth. But its like jazz, everything you have like the core frame and then everything else is sort of a variation of that depending on the circumstance and how creative you feel and what other information you put into it (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

Callaway echoed Byrne's sentiments about using a basic journalism format. The only format she said she followed was to, "put the information in the correct order and to make sure that the intended information is conveyed logically." The website that Garcia worked for did not force its' writers to strictly follow AP style when writing articles but they did try and follow the inverted pyramid style of article writing. Garcia stated:

We don't adhere strictly to the AP style guide or anything like that but we do try and follow a basic sort of news feel and that I try to get the sort of meat of the story first in a sentence or two and then try and get more detail as you go. Sort of like a pyramid structure is the way I do it (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

McCoury said that he followed the same formatting in his writing that is seen in newspapers, explaining, "Nothing other than basic newspaper writing forms that flow from establishing a lead and then a nut graph up high about why we're writing this story now and what's important. You can write all kinds of stories from that basic premise." Haynes stated that the format he used was one he had developed over years of studying and practicing journalism. While he did not follow a specific template, he pointed out that he always researched his topic, pared it down to the pertinent information, attained quotes, and then formed a cohesive article.

Professional Competition

Five of the journalists agreed that getting the scoop on a story over their competition was important in their work. The sixth journalist, while saying that getting a scoop was not the driving force behind her work, did say that it was good when she broke a story. "There is no such thing as an exclusive on the internet because five minutes later, ten minutes later, its

everywhere,” said Hoon. “So this idea of the exclusive, its still a silly old term terminology.” She believed that even though a scoop was important, the speed at which information moved on the internet meant a scoop was perhaps not as crucial as it used to be.

The most important reason to get a scoop, according to the journalists, was it increased traffic on the website that broke the story. Even though most other sites would put the information on their own site, they usually linked the original piece in their story. That link drew more viewers to the original site, which in turn increased ad revenue, the main source of income for game websites. Garcia explained, saying:

Our money depends on ad revenue of course and ad revenue depends on website traffic and website traffic depends on a lot of referral links. And the way you get referral links is to have something before all of the other sites, if we get something exclusively that the of the other gaming websites don’t have but would like to report on then they are in this situation where they have to link to us and we certainly benefit from that traffic (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

The only journalist who did not say a scoop was important was Callaway who put a higher priority on the quality of the article. This, she believed, would leave a longer lasting impression on the readers. She believed that due to the sheer number of sites in existence and how quickly a story moves around the internet that a scoop did not mean what it used to, an idea Hoon agreed with. Callaway said that if she felt she had a chance to break a story first then she would certainly work quickly to do so but most of the time she focused on the quality of writing and the depth of the story, saying:

There are so many game sites that offer news that most consumers often don’t know who broke the story first but those consumers are wary of the quality of story. Largely though, I’d rather develop content thoroughly and accurately than quickly. There are so many websites writing game news that word travels fast and no one really knows who is ‘first’ and there is no clear benefit to being five minutes faster than someone else. Rather than trying to be ‘the first’ or ‘the only’, I try instead to produce the best and most thorough reporting, or to develop an angle on an event that others haven’t considered (personal communication, September, 2010).

Journalistic Cooperation

All six journalists were unanimous in saying that if asked, they would help a fellow journalist with minor information from a story. According to the participants, there were not a lot of game journalists out there and there was a lot of camaraderie among them. Although they all agreed they would help, each journalist stated they would be surprised if another journalist actually asked for that help. They felt the availability of information on the internet made this practice largely obsolete. There was a limit that the participants would be willing to help another though. Sharing large pieces of information about a story someone was working to break was the limit on cooperation. "Sure, as long as it's not vital information to a story I am actively working on breaking," said McCoury.

Routines

Most of the journalists interviewed did not encounter a wide variance of news event categories that a news reporter might see. Thusly, they did not have a wide range of routines in dealing with the news they encountered. The majority of participants would hear about a topic, research it until they felt they had enough information, write the article, and then present it to their editors. Byrne, Hoon, and Callaway all stated this was their normal routine. Byrne stated:

It depends on if it's a news story then the news breaks, then you verify the basic elements of the news story and then by calling all the relevant parties, you have to at least attempt to get their point of view and a statement from them or an interview from them and then what we do these days is we put it first on the web and then as soon we can, the core, what happened. And then how, what, when, where, why and all that good stuff (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

Garcia, now an editor, reinforced the routine that Byrne, Hoon, and Callaway described. However, he explained it from the role of an editor who assigned stories to his reporters and let them research the leads and then present him with their work.

Not all of the journalists had to write articles on unexpected events. Haynes and McCoury were able to pick their own stories, develop the ideas, and then pitch them to their respective editors. When his editors asked Haynes to write on a particular topic he was given time to research the idea and create his own angle. Haynes explained:

Ideas come from anywhere: articles I've read on a topic that I enjoy that sparks a different approach or idea that hasn't been done or done the same way, my own interests and trying to find a way to fit them into a format that would relate to readers of gaming publications (i.e. music that ties into game culture), and occasionally editors I work with regularly will get in touch and ask me to come up with a feature angle on some topic they deem interesting for their readership (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

Haynes went on to further explain his process of forming a story, saying:

Writing-wise, I usually start by poking around the web to see what kind of stuff has been written about the topic I'm writing and trying to find good potential sources to interview. I usually do some of this before even pitching an idea to make sure I can pull it off when I get a green light. I'll then reach out to individuals to interview about the topic. This tends to generate a ton of material to work with (usually a few thousands words of interview material for one article that'll ultimately be boiled down to 1,000 words or so with only a handful of choice quotes). I usually start out the writing phase by dumping everything I have (interviews, notes, and links to articles online) in a word doc. I'll save that, then open a second one where I paste all of the interview stuff in. I start from there...poring over the text to look for interesting points to discuss and possible excellent direct quotes to use in the piece. I'll sometimes set out a basic outline for the piece to setup a cohesive structure and flow for the article. Then I'll bash out the lead and start writing the rest afterwards. I often edit my own work as I'm writing, so I'll go back after I've written a few graphs and change things or re-write portions. I don't do as much re-writing after I've finished a piece, since I spend a lot of time on that throughout the whole process. Though I do go back and read it all again, check for errors, and massage any awkward sections out until they're smooth (personal communication, October 5, 2010).

- **RQ 2. How do corporate public relations efforts affect video game journalists' work?**

The results section for research question two is broken down into two themes that emerged during the interviews: the reasons participants gave explaining why they felt they were or were not able to withstand influence and whether the relationship the journalists had with a

game company or studio influenced them when writing a story. When objectivity is discussed in this section it is referring to the journalists being free from external public relations influence as described by Schudson (2001).

This study did not include interviews with game company public relations workers and as a result the conclusions drawn in this section are based on the statements from one side of the relationship between journalists and PR agents. This omission of PR interviews means these answers are not fully reliable measures. However, there is validity in the conclusions despite not including PR practitioners in this research due to the tight cluster in the responses by six different journalists from six different news outlets.

Reasons Why Journalists Were Able to Resist Influence

All six of the journalists who participated in the study felt that the public relations efforts of video game companies did not influence their work. The participants cited three main reasons why they were able to resist PR efforts: 1) rules set forth by the outlet they worked for when dealing with external PR, 2) their own personal rules when interacting with PR workers, 3) their clear understanding and assertion of their roles as journalists and those of PR people.

Some of the media outlets the participants worked for had rules in place governing the interactions between a journalist and a game company. This was done largely to protect the credibility and objectivity of the work on their sites. The companies that employed McCoury, Byrne, and Callaway each had rules stating that employees were not allowed to accept free travel or housing for game company press junkets nor could they accept personal gifts. If they were to attend a press junket, their respective employers paid for them. Most companies also had rules about any gifts and games that journalists received. The common policy of the gaming media outlets was to accept a game to review and then give it away to fans once the review was

completed. Haynes, a freelance writer was the only participant who said he would occasionally keep a game he received to review. He did go on to specify that this was usually only for games where he expected to review future sequels and would eventually need to brush up on their predecessors.

Participants also used their own personal rules when encountering outside PR practitioners. Byrne posed a hypothetical situation to herself whenever contacted by game studio PR agents, saying:

I think the rule of thumb would be would you be embarrassed if you were on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, then don't do it. And if you are OK with people reading about what you did on the cover of the Wall Street Journal, then go ahead (personal communication, September 5, 2010).

Clear understandings of what their goals were as journalists and what the goals of PR workers were also helped the journalists retain their objectivity. While it was important to maintain a good working relationship, the interviewees at times had to remind their PR contacts of these roles. Once these boundaries were established, little to no effort was made to cross them. Haynes stated that keeping a courteous, professional relationship with PR people was key to keeping journalistic integrity. "There's more to it than just being polite and friendly. I don't let PR folks sway my opinion or try to influence my coverage. I'm firm but polite on this. It's important to stay professional," said Haynes.

Influence of Relationships with Game Studios

Relationships between game journalists and game studios are important for a game journalist to work effectively, said Callaway. The game studios are what the reporters are writing about and therefore they are often the main source of information. In turn, the game studios rely on the gaming press to disperse information to the consumers. Despite this important symbiotic

relationship, all of the interviewees said that their relationships with a studio did not influence what stories they wrote regardless if it were a positive or negative story.

Although the journalists' relationships with each company did not prevent them from writing negative stories about the companies or their products, several did point out that they were mindful of how they approached the stories, the tone of the stories, and their choice of words when composing a potentially damaging pieces. These careful considerations when writing a negative article stemmed from the need to be seen as having objectivity and without an agenda against any particular entity.

When Hoon wrote a story, he stated that his first obligation was to the reader and not the company. His relationship with a company did not influence his writing. If a particular article was critical, he made sure to back his information up with links and sources. That way, he could not be accused of having a bias.

Callaway explained that she was always conscious about what the language she used so as not to be perceived as having an agenda against a company. Callaway stated:

The position of neutrality is important to be a good journalist and to maintain a good working relationship with a company. If I am developing a story that I think will be perceived by the company as being highly negative, I am extra careful to make sure that the story exists for a good reason and it is well-supported. I wouldn't risk alienating a major publisher, for example, over some anonymously sourced minor issue that I couldn't verify. I don't stir the pot for its own sake (personal communication, September 23, 2010).

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The results of the in-depth interviews with the six video game journalists allowed the researcher to determine if the participants followed the norms and routines of news journalists and if they were influenced by outside PR efforts. These results provide pertinent information to consumers of video game news when assessing the quality of information presented to them.

RQ 1. Do Video Game Journalists Follow the Same Norms and Routines that Mainstream News Journalists Do?

All six of the journalists indicated that they largely followed the norms and routines of news journalism. The responses from the participating journalists were similar enough to find redundancy in their answers. Even with a limited number of participants, the results make a case that video game journalists adhere to the same norms that mainstream news journalist do with the exception of the enduring values norm.

The one norm that the journalists were not asked about was the enduring values norm. The researcher chose to not present the participants with questions about enduring values for two reasons, the first being the political orientation of the norm and the game journalists lack of professional involvement with politics. As specialized journalists, the participants wrote about one industry, video games. The consumer base for their sites was made up of an international audience, much of whom would not keep up with politics in the United States. Video game journalists simply do not write about values like pastoralism, national leadership, and certainly not ethnocentrism. These game sites are international with foreign readers and overseas offices. The second factor when deciding to omit enduring values was time constraints. The data collection for this research happened to take place during the busy video game convention season with events like PAX, the New York Comic Con, and the Tokyo Game Show. The interviewees were flying all over the world to attend these events and had little spare time to be interviewed.

Garcia was only able to allot thirty minutes to participate in an in-depth interview with twenty open-ended questions. The lack of connection between the enduring values of hard news journalism and practices game journalism coupled with limited time available to conduct interviews led the researcher to leave out enduring values.

RQ 2. How Do Corporate Public Relations Efforts Affect Video Game Journalists' Work?

This study's findings indicate that video game journalists' work is not affected by video game company attempts at influence. All six journalists agreed that they were never influenced by any outside forces to alter their work for anything but factual corrections. In fact, the participants rarely encountered any attempts by game companies to sway them. The results yielded in this research contradict how other niche journalists described their relationships with companies in their respective fields.

In the literature review, a technology reporter said that corporate public relations were able to pressure technology journalists (Johnson, 2010). In this case, the journalist detailed how Apple would pressure reporters and outlets by threatening to pull advertisements or withhold test products if a news outlet did something that Apple did not like.

It bears mentioning that Apple also will remove advertising from outlets that it is unhappy with, as they did with Gizmodo ever since we reported on Steve Jobs' health problems (Johnson, 2010).

This account indicates that Apple held a total advocacy position over the technology reporter on the communication continuum.

An automotive journalist wrote that he had quite a different type of relationship with companies in his field of reporting. Most automotive journalists were in a dominant position over his PR counterparts to the point where they can demand and receive free cars from car

companies year round (Baruth, 2010). The journalist explained the mentality of many automotive journalists, saying:

As the number of free-car-worthy outlets simply *exploded* in the past decade, so did the number of free cars. Everybody expects a car now, and many expect to have *two* every week. Last year, I sat in the back of an airport shuttle with a small-city print journo who bragged to me that not only had *he* not owned a car in a decade, his adult daughter had *never* owned a car. She simply drove the less desirable of the vehicles dropped off for the week. Some people get caught letting their kids drive Porsche Turbos and still get fifty-two free rides a year (Baruth, 2010).

This account indicates that the automotive industry employs a pure accommodation position on the communication continuum with automotive reporters.

The findings of this study contradict both of the accounts given by the technology and automotive journalists. The video game journalists interviewed by the researcher all claimed that neither they nor the game company PR people had any real sway over the other. Haynes summed up the relationship that all participants expressed having with PR people, saying:

I always find that being polite, professional, and friendly when dealing with PR folks (or anyone business-related) is good advice. You'll always run into some PR folks that are jackasses. Some use strong-arming, threatening, browbeating, and other tactics when you do something they don't like. But most of them are decent folk that understand the benefit of having a good working relationship with the press – even when it comes to dealing with topics and stories that may not put their clients in the best light (personal communication, October 11, 2010).

When describing their relationships with their PR counterparts, the participants expressed that they had a clear understanding of what the PR agent wanted and conversely the PR agents knew what the journalists wanted. This understanding seems to foster a respect of each other goals and create a symbiotic relationship between them rather a parasitic relationship where one party has more power than the other. The findings of this study indicate that there is a two-way symmetrical communication model between the game companies and the game journalists.

The researcher concluded that this mutually beneficial relationship is a key factor that prevents the PR agents from trying to control the journalists and the journalists potentially being susceptible to it.

It is important to discuss how the participants differentiated between two types of game journalists. The interviewees stated that there were game news reporters and game reviewers. Journalists who report the news focus on what is happening in the industry and report on it objectively while reviewers play newly released titles and then tell the consumers about the pros and cons of that game. The interviewees rarely wrote game reviews but they suggested that if anyone in the gaming media was influenced by game companies then it was likely reviewers. The interviewees believed reviewers were more likely to be targeted by outside pressure because of how reviews can affect game sales. Hoon suggested that not only were game sales a possible factor in increased pressure but also the bonuses tied to review scores, saying:

I'm unaware of there being influence from the companies or anything along those lines because we don't, we only recently started doing reviews and previews, that's where PR, marketing, and money is, I mean bonuses tied. If you give the game a bad review that PR company is not going to get that thousands and thousands of dollars bonuses. You know, if it gets below an 80 on Metacritic. So, this is something we don't really deal with (personal communication, September 8, 2010).

A Look at Public Relations

The relationship between game journalists and game company public relations practitioners described by the interviewees suggests that the PR agents employ Grunig's two-way symmetrical model. While there were a few complaints of the occasional overzealous PR person, the journalists who interacted with outside PR indicated that the two parties understood each other's goals and recognized that cooperation would help bring those goals to fruition. The claims that not only were they not swayed by PR tactics but that the journalists rarely even

encountered them reinforces this conclusion. Callaway explained her relationship with PR workers, saying:

It's good business to make sure that you and the public relations person are both on the level; when you have a good relationship with them, there is a mutual understanding that you both have a job to do. They want to protect their client; you want to get the relevant facts to your audience. Usually, again, there are some compromises, and again if you have a good relationship with the PR person and you're only writing the truth, you earn their trust that you're not arbitrarily 'out to get' anyone and they will generally work with you to do the story you want to do (personal communication, September 23, 2010).

Although game company PR workers were not included in this study to verify the communication model used, the accounts given by the game journalists indicate that the beneficial communication relationship they had with their public relations counterparts was a two-way symmetrical model. This conclusion supports Grunig's theory that a position on the communication continuum between total advocacy and total accommodation is a good communication model.

Limitations and Future Research

The prime limitation of this study was the limited number of participants who agreed to participate in this study. The initial goal was ten to fifteen video game journalists but only six journalists agreed to participate. Twenty-nine journalists were contacted, six of whom participated, eighteen never responded, one said no, two agreed to participate but never did, and two answered the questions via email but would not send the consent form back so the data they provided could not be used. Attempts to follow up with the unresponsive journalists did not elicit any responses.

The search for participants was further hampered by the lack of qualified participants available. The researcher sought out paid writers who wrote about industry news but the apparent high transient rate of video game journalists between outlets made it difficult to obtain current

contact information. Also, many gaming sites do not actually hire writers; instead numerous sites employ a few senior editors and then rely on unpaid contributors to provide content for them.

This research failed to account for social desirability bias in the journalists' responses. Future researches should either conduct a content analysis of the journalists' work or interview public relations workers from game companies that the journalists interact with to verify the statements given are not biased to make the respondents look better. Although the six participants' answered similarly, the results would be strengthened with further research.

However, despite the small number of interviewees, redundancy was found in their answers resulting in useful data for the study. The six journalists who did participate were all reasonably uniform in their answers to the questions which indicated legitimate conclusions. Although the uniformity of answers do indicate validity for the study, it is possible that the limited number of participants were not a truly representative sample of all game journalists.

The research was further limited by the absence of interviews with game company public relations workers. The lack of participation by game company PR workers prevents the responses of the journalists from being compared to their PR counterparts. Although the tight cluster of responses by the participants points to validity for the research, the results could have been strengthened by interviews with people on the other side of the relationship. As it stands, the results of this research rely on how one side of the relationship between game journalists and game company PR practitioners describe their interaction with nothing to compare or contrast it to. Future research should reach out to the public relations workers at various video game companies who interact with the gaming press. In-depth interviews with the game company PR would provide useful information from the counterparts of game journalists to give a more complete picture of how the dynamic between journalists and PR.

Any future research conducted on video game journalism should try and involve game reviewers as well as game news journalists. There were many points during the interviews where the participants thought if anyone in game journalism was affected by outside PR that it would be reviewers, but nobody had actually witnessed this happen. It would behoove any future researcher to get the views of the other half of game journalism.

Conclusions and Implications

Video game journalism, like video games, is a young medium. As a young medium, game journalism is constantly changing and evolving into a more established industry. These next few years should be interesting to watch them grow and meet challenges that other media have already faced. One such challenge the industry is facing now is the pursuit of credibility amongst its consumers. The findings of this research suggest that game journalists are conducting themselves in a manner that will increase their credibility over time.

The data provided by the participants also indicates that unlike previous accounts of game journalists, these journalists have a mutually beneficial relationship with PR people in their industry where neither side controls the other. Ashley and Elliot (2009) said that the reliance on game companies for advertisements on their sites put the companies in a position of power over the journalists. The participants never mentioned having to deal with ads or worry about game companies placing ads. They described it as each party equally needing each other. The “carrots and sticks” that Ashley and Elliot (2009) mentioned was never encountered by these game journalists, mainly because of the rules they or their employers had about accepting “carrots.” The “sticks” such as blackballing, or access journalism was not a problem because it was either not beneficial to the studios or the speed at which information travels on the internet meant that everyone would have the information soon enough. Chris Buffa (2006) said that many game

journalists just write what they are told by game studios. Once again, this was not seen here. All the journalists said they enjoyed great autonomy and their relationship with the companies and possible backlash did not affect what they wrote.

Similarly, the data provided by the participants also indicates that unlike other niche journalists, game journalists have a mutually beneficial relationship with PR people in their industry where neither side controls the other. Johnson (2010) from Gizmodo.com reported that Apple wielded considerable clout with technology reporters by threatening to withhold test products or advertising. No interviewee claimed to have ever seen this. Baruth (2010) described how automotive journalists had a lot of power over the auto industry. Once again, no interviewee claimed to have ever seen this in their relationships with the game companies. These direct contradictions to previous accounts of gaming and niche journalists suggest that game journalists are progressing towards a more independent role as reporters.

According to the data collected in this study, it appears that video game journalists are establishing themselves as a legitimate and autonomous news entity. News workers first adopted the journalism norms to lend credibility to their work and increase professionalism in the industry. These norms are the rules to achieve what is considered quality journalism in the United States. The results of this study indicate that there are video game journalists who have adopted the same norms as news journalists. Out of the six participants, only one said that he outright tried to avoid a norm, the norm being the watchdog role. He tried to avoid being a watchdog over the game industry because he felt that he would get too involved and show a bias. Two more journalists said they were hesitant to act as watchdogs for the same reason, though they said they would do so if needed. One participant said that she would rather focus on the quality of her stories than getting a scoop described in the professional competition norm and

one participant felt that the balance and fairness norm was important but hard to accomplish because of the lighthearted nature of the industry.

While they are not there yet, these results imply that game journalists are moving towards a more professional and credible status as reporters. If game journalists fully adhere to the norms of news journalism, they might gain the same credibility and legitimacy in their field as news journalists do in theirs.

This adherence to the norms of journalism could also account for the discrepancy between the previous stories of game journalists being pushed around by external PR forces and the experiences that the participants claimed to have. Grunig (2002) described a communication continuum where the extremes are total advocacy by a company and total accommodation. Buffa (2006) described the game companies as employing a total advocacy role over the gaming press where the studios held most of the power in the relationship. The data collected in this research indicates that the participants experience a two-way symmetrical communication relationship with the companies where no one side holds sway over the other. The gaming presses shift towards a more credible and professional media might explain this shift. The more credibility that the journalists have with the consumers then the more power that they have. The data indicates that the two sides enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship. This apparent shift does not mean that the journalists are treating their PR counterparts unethically or that they are teaming up with the corporate PR agents in some nefarious way. This current communication relationship shown in the data suggests that the journalists and PR workers have an understanding that they both have a job to do and their goals can be met equally.

This data gathered in this study helps fill several gaps in existing research. This research explores a type of journalism that is previously unexplored, video game journalism. This form of niche journalism is relatively young and had yet to be explored academically. The data gives a stark contrast to accounts of other forms of niche journalism indicating that all of them might be different depending on the industry they cover. The findings presented in this study provide information to the consumers of video game news that had previously only been speculated on. Consumers can use this data to determine if they can trust what they read as objective reporting or if they are being fed lines from game companies.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you have previous experience in journalism before your current job?
2. Do you write about anything other than video games?
3. When writing your articles, do you follow some sort of template?
4. Can you give me a brief rundown of the creation process for an article? Where does the idea for an article originate, how is it decided who will write it, what are the roles of editors, etc.
 - Do factors like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty play an important role when deciding what stories to write?
5. Is there any particular way that you like to approach a story?
6. Is objectivity important when writing? Even when writing game reviews, how important is objectivity? Are you free from outside influence to be objective?
7. What role, if any, does story balance play when writing about industry news? What about balanced sourcing?
8. Do video game journalists serve a watchdog role for the industry? If so, in what function?
9. How important is getting a scoop on a story, whether it is information about an upcoming title or any industry news? How important is the exclusive?
10. If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?
11. Are there any written rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?
12. Are there any kind of unwritten rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?
13. In relation to your journalistic work, what kind of interaction do you have with public relations workers from game companies?

Examples:

 - Do they call you?
 - Do they send you gifts?
 - Do they bring you on trips?
 - Do they send you threatening emails?
 - Do they send you press releases?

14. When writing an article that is critical of a product or an event, are you mindful of the relationship between you and the company you are writing about?
15. Are journalists ever influenced to write a story in a particular way because of outside pressure? If so, where does the pressure come from? How so?
16. If you do change a story, what are the limits you place on what you are willing to change?
17. Do game company PR workers influence editors or news organizations? If so, how much and how do they do it?
18. Is video game journalism the same thing as news journalism? Should it be held to the same standards?
19. What are your feelings on the status of game journalism today?

APPENDIX B IRB APPROVAL FORMS

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

– Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

– A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

(A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.

(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)

(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.

*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.

(D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)

(E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://phrp.nihtaining.com/users/login.php>.)

(F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.6792
irb@lsu.edu
lsu.edu/irb

1) Principal Investigator: Ben Jenkins Rank: Graduate Student
Dept: Mass Communication Ph: 225-802-7216 E-mail: bjenk11@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

Nicole Dahmen - Assistant Professor 225-578-6811 rdahmen@lsu.edu

IRB# ES175 LSU Proposal # _____
☒ Complete Application
☒ Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists

Study Exempted By:

Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
03 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb

4) Proposal? (yes or no) ☐ If Yes, LSU Proposal Number

Exemption Expires: 8-29-2013

Also, if YES, either

☒ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant

OR

☐ More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students) Professional Journalists

*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Ben Jenkins Date 8/26/10 (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted ☒ Not Exempted ☐ Category/Paragraph 2
Reviewer Lisa Lundy Signature Lisa K Lundy Date 8/30/10

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study, W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Ben Jenkins 225-802-7216
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to see what effect, if any, the efforts of corporate public relations are on video game journalism.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The interviews will be conducted via skype, telephone, or by email, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Each interview is expected to take approximately thirty minutes.
8. Benefits: The benefit to each participant is to help study their professional fields and increase the field of knowledge on the topic.
9. Risks: There are no known risks to participants in this study.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: Writing "Yes" in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

Study Exempted By:

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Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb

Exemption Expires: 8-29-2013

APPENDIX C
JAMES McCOURY CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
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_____ YES _____

APPENDIX D

JAMES McCOURY INTERVIEW

BTJ: Can you tell me about any previous experience you might have in journalism before your current job?

JM: I was a medical writer at [redacted: company name] before becoming a digital entertainment writer. At my previous reporting jobs I covered health care, police, education and general assignment duties at the Sioux Falls (S.D.) Argus Leader. Prior to that, I covered police, courts and other general assignment duties at The Independence (Mo.) Examiner.

BTJ: Do you write about anything other than video games?

JM: Yes, I write about all of digital entertainment including Internet and Web-based services, home video and digital music.

BTJ: When writing your articles, do you follow some sort of template?

JM: Nothing other than basic newspaper writing forms that flow from establishing a lead and then a nut graph up high about why we're writing this story now and what's important. You can write all kinds of stories from that basic premise.

BTJ: Can you give me a brief rundown of the creation process for an article? Where does the idea for an article originate, how is it decided who will write it, what are the roles of editors, etc. - Do factors like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty?

JM: I come up with most of my own ideas based on what is happening in the video game industry or what trends are happening in entertainment. Occasionally, a trend breaks like a viral video or song. Some times game publishers and other companies come to us offering us exclusive news about a new release or a development that generates a story.

I give a list of upcoming stories to my editor and we hash out what we should do. Sometimes he gives them a new twist. Sometimes our discussion does that, too. We discuss where we think the story will run -- inside the section, on the front of the Life section -- but that changes based on the news of the day.

I file a story to editor usually the morning of the day it is to run -- occasionally I file them days in advance -- and it is edited. Editor or I trim it to fit the space given and send to a copy desk, which does its own edit and writes headlines and cutlines.

Timeliness and novelty can always help a story run sooner or gain prominence. News-you-can-use is important, but may have a more vague time peg, so it could hold a day or two, in comparison to other stories.

BTJ: Is there any particular way that you like to approach a story?

JM: Well, if it's a topic I'm unfamiliar with, I like to do some research before doing interviews. Then, I just try to take into account various types of readers in crafting the story. What's most important to me? What did I learn while reporting the story? What basics need repeating for newcomers to the subject? What special can I add to those well-versed in the subject?

BTJ: Is objectivity important when writing? Even when writing game reviews, how important is objectivity? Are you free from outside influence to be objective?

JM: I don't do too many reviews, but I do them occasionally. Of course, you must remain objective. If not, your readers won't trust your opinion. Lose that and you've lost your credibility. Most game companies provide copies of the games in advance of their retail release so you can get the review or other coverage of the game in print and online timely. That's about the only influence I can fathom. But since 99% of the companies do that, there's no undue influence by one company over another. I've been at this long enough that I don't have to cut down a product or project to make a name. And I'm not usually a columnist. If I wrote a story finding fault with a product, I would have other voices cementing the facts.

BTJ: What role, if any, does story balance play when writing about industry news?

JM: Not sure what you mean here. Balance between what forces? Sometimes we may end up writing a story that we wouldn't write because we get access to a celebrity, perhaps a musician or actor. But our space in print is so tight that we don't run many stories that don't need to run or that aren't worthy, if that is what you mean.

When writing a story debating the virtues of something, I always seek out industry sources, analysts, even other journalists, to look at various sides of a trend or release to add balance in that way.

BTJ: Do video game journalists serve a watchdog role for the industry? If so, in what function?

JM: In a way, but that's not an official part of the job description. When new aspects of the industry crop up, such as copy protection schemes that may affect user experience or increased fees on buyers of used games, we cover that so consumers know what is happening in advance of a game hitting stores. Reviewers give an idea of what a game will be like before someone buys it, just as movie critics do for films.

BTJ: How important is getting a scoop on a story, whether it is information about an upcoming title or any industry news?

JM: It's definitely important, especially in the age of RSS feeds, Twitter and Facebook. Beat the competition to a few stories and readers and game developers themselves will subscribe to your online feeds. Plus, the fact that you can deliver a well-rounded scoop increases the reputation of the outlet and the reporter.

BTJ: If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?

JM: Sure, as long as it's not vital information to a story I am actively working on breaking.

BTJ: Are there any written rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

JM: Our ethics policies preclude us from accepting free travel and housing for video game company events. We can't accept personal gifts.

BTJ: Are there any kind of unwritten rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

JM: //this repeat may have been caused by my reformatting the file.

BTJ: In relation to your journalistic work, what kind of interaction do you have with public relations workers from game companies?

Examples:

BTJ: Do they call you?

JM: yes and email.

BTJ: Do they send you gifts?

JM: Not really. We get promotional stuff tied to games. I don't consider those gifts. Occasionally, someone will send a box of cookies. Most know our policies prevent us from accepting anything worth more than \$25.

BTJ: Do they bring you on trips?

JM: I'm always offered trips but as I said above we can't accept that. Once in a while, I will go on the trip but paper will pay its way.

BTJ: Do they send you threatening emails?

JM: I wouldn't say that. Occasionally, after a story runs I'll get an email or phone call that they wished we hadn't done the story a certain way. Or complain that their game wasn't included.

BTJ: Do they send you press releases?

JM: mostly on email. Hundreds.

BTJ: When writing an article that is critical of a product or an event, are you mindful of the relationship between you and the company you are writing about?

JM: I try not to be. If a company totally disengaged from us after a story, we'd survive. But I know so many people in the industry that I'm sure if you could dissect my brain I probably have favorable thoughts about some companies vs. others. That's where the editor process helps. I'll ask my editor or colleague: "Am I being too hard/soft on these guys?"

BTJ: Are journalists ever influenced to write a story in a particular way because of outside pressure? If so, where does the pressure come from? How so?

JM: Sometimes an editor wants a story written a certain way. If I disagree, I'll do my best to bend him or her to my way of thinking. Hopefully, we have a compromise.

BTJ: If you do change a story, what are the limits you place on what you are willing to change?

JM: I guess that is a case by case basis based on how newsworthy the story is, how important the change is and how invested I am in the story itself.

BTJ: Do game company PR workers influence editors or news organizations? If so, how much and how do they do it?

JM: From the video game companies or the media company? I don't think that happens much, if ever, at our outlet at least on my beat.

BTJ: Is video game journalism the same thing as news journalism? Should it be held to the same standards?

JM: Well, it depends on the outlet. Video game journalism at a news organization at ours is held to the same standards as anything else in our paper, on our web sites, etc.

BTJ: What are your feelings on the status of game journalism today?

JM: I think it's improving in quality and quantity. Look at the reporting we do, the New York Times, the Washington Post and LA Times. Then, most game magazines have had redesigns and refocusing that has resulted in higher quality content. And the growing blogosphere presses various issues that drives all of us to work harder and better.

APPENDIX E
SUZANNE BYRNE CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
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12. Signatures: Writing “Yes” in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

YES

APPENDIX F

SUZANNE BYRNE INTERVIEW

BTJ: Can you tell me about your journalism experience to date?

SB: I was with the Oregonian which is my hometown paper in Portland Oregon and then I also worked for the Washington Post, USA Today, and the Boston Globe before I came here?

BTJ: Do you write about a lot of things other than video games and the industry?

SB: Well my specialty over the years has been business journalism and for the last 11 years I've done tech coverage and I've covered video games. Video games has been between 25 and 50 percent of my beat, um, for the past 11 years.

BTJ: When you are writing an article, is there a particular type of template that you like to follow or just every article is its own case?

SB: Um, every article is its own case but there are, of course you know, other types of articles. Certainly types of outlines that are followed and you use articles you lead with like what is happening and why it is important and the nut graph and so on and so forth. But its like jazz, everything, you have like the core frame and then everything else is sort of a variation of that depending on the circumstance and how creative you feel and what other information you put into it.

BTJ: I like that analogy

BTJ: Can you give me a breakdown on how a story comes to be, on how the idea comes down, kind of through the creation, to the final product, just a brief kind of

SB: Sure. It depends on if it's a news story then the news breaks, then you verify the basic elements of the news story and then by calling all the relevant parties, you have to at least attempt to get their point of view and a statement from them or an interview from them and then what we do these days is we put it first on the web and then as soon we can, the core, what happened. And then how, what, when, where, why and all that good stuff. We update the web story and continually try and update it once, twice, even three times a day depending on how interesting the story is and how much is developing and depending on your print deadline, you wrap everything you got by the time you hit your print deadline and put as much of that into the paper as you can. The print story runs the following day and this is the problem with magazines and such too, is that you have to give the readers a little something extra, you cant just regurgitate old copy and what you got on the web in the paper even though the readership doesn't really overlap that much. It is 10 to 25 percent overlap in any given day. So chance are they haven't seen it before but we still like to give people a little extra because it is a day old by the time it get to them we try and think OK, what is the next step in the story? What does it involve, what does it mean and then we try and add that factor into the story besides what just happened. We try and give people a little extra even though it happened yesterday, 24 hours ago, know more

<unintelligible>

You know there are feature stories, you know, you are in journalism school, there are certain <unintelligible> stories like there are profiles of people, there are profiles of companies, profiles of products, there's print story, idea story, and all sorts of different flavors. Those are all becoming a bit more wide open and most of my feature stories I pretty much proposed and I what I like to do I like to marinate on the story idea for a bit. I kind of want to think about before I propose it, I kind of want to think about all of the angles and how to flush it out and the what it would require me to do to actually write the story, how much reporting, how much research it is, is it something that is gettable. And once I kind of have my head wrapped around the kernel of the idea then I like to go over the idea and then I think about how to pitch it to my editor. Your editor is really the most important person in your life if you are working in any sort of journalistic capacity. You know they have the power to make you life really really miserable or really rewarding. It's a really important relationship to cultivate but I really think hard about what I say to them before I say it unless they ask me for my opinion and then I still think a little bit before I open my mouth. I try and think from their point of view, what would they want? What are the demands on this job? You know, maybe, I know that they love to come up with a centerpiece for next week and they don't have anything in the can and the centerpiece is kind of general towards a company profile. EA, I look up and see what they have up ahead and say, Hmm, maybe my story idea can fit into this slot. Sometimes not, sometimes it's just an idea and what you want to do before you go to your editor is kind of want to do a nut graph in your head and say why this story is really important. Why do people want to read it? Not just what its about but why do they want to read it, why do people want to read it, why is it significant? Why does it have a wider ramifications? And once you have that sort of spiel, you know the 60-second elevator pitch in your head you can go and pitch it to them or you write a little one paragraph thing that sort of summarizes it all. It's what we call a sked but its just jargon. It's really just a one-paragraph summary of your story. It's really an art form unto itself. The sked is really important because it coalesces your thinking about your idea and it gives your idea more punch. And basically the sked that your return to when writing, you know, your throw in your sked and then you go out and you <unintelligible> for a couple of day or a day and you do a bunch of reporting on a bunch of various <unintelligible> that you can gather and it gets filled with all this detail, right? And you return to it and you are buzzing with all this information and you are like, oh my God, how am I going to write it. You <unintelligible> that you went out and did all of this. So that's pretty much the process. Then I write it and I leave on the sked a lot to do the mental outline and then the other thing I do is while I was at work I would always fly out for my leads, always, always, always. Because that can be the hardest thing. That lead has to captivate, it has to summarize, it has to do a whole bunch of things. The first sentence has to be true, has to be really, really good. It has to be the best thing about your story and so you are always casting an eye out for it cause its hard to do it on a deadline when you got to turn it in in 30 minutes and you have been thinking about it and all of the sudden you hit a wall. So that more of journalism in general not necessarily video game journalism. So that probably not your questions is it?

BTJ: Prominence, proximity, news-you-can-use, timeliness, conflict, trend, and novelty. Does that come into factor when writing about video games?

SB: Sure, it's another way of thinking about a story. You know the conflict thing is really interesting because it is a bit of a double-edged sword. You're looking out for conflict and

change. Journalists sort of if you think about it, when things sort of pop up in your life when things change and then we lead. When things are back to normal, things are no longer there. The big news are onto the next hurricane, the next disaster. We're always there when things are changing, when things are happening. So you ask, what's the change? Of course there is conflict but conflict is something that changes because of what happens and you really don't control that. But conflict is really sort of a dangerous thing to juggle with because you can kind of manufacture conflict and that's a lot of the same. You think that your story might need edge so you think, God, I got to have conflict in there. And that's where you go down that slippery slope of temptation and you make things more dramatic than it really is. So I'm really, you really have to be careful about conflict. And you can also lose credibility if you use conflict constantly. But there are things that are used as a stock and trade and we do it successfully because you know they are very brash and may have a devil may care as a blogger attitude you know and I don't mean to be mean to bloggers I'm just saying its sort of a quick hit and move on kind of with some them. But if you are going to cover an industry like the game industry its really small and everyone knows everyone else. And if you do that too after in the game industry you can burn bridges and you're never going to get hired, people wont trust you. Like I said, the game industry is pretty small, you kind of have to be careful when you write about conflict, you have to make sure it is really there and you are actually representing those facts really accurately and try to be as neutral as you can. Also without making it feel incredibly dull or you are becoming competitive.

BTJ: Are you referring to the industry? You don't want to offend companies?

SB: You don't want to give them the impression that you aren't being fair. You can write the most controversial story out there and if both sides feel that you were fair, and you gave them a fair shake an that you didn't blow things out of proportion then you're OK> But if you make mountains out of mole hills in order to get headlines and readers and clicks then they will stop trusting you.

BTJ: So you think its pretty easy to stay objective when writing up games and what not?

SB: No, it's not. It's really really not. Most of the people who write about games love games, they grew up with games, they play games all the time. They're very passionate about games so they're very hard to keep an objective eye. OK, so there are two types of game journalists. Not two, there are probably like a zillion more but there are two big types of journalists out there, you know? People who are out there. There are people who review and then these people are people who write about the industry. When you review, it's great because you can say whatever you want. You can be as passionate as you want about games and the more passionate you are, the better. Review journalism is sort of its own little thing and its really kind of a special thing. I don't do review journalism. It's an old school rule in the industry that if you write about an industry that you can't review its product. It's very old school. Id don't know how long this rule will last but you're supposed to be able if you report about it, you're supposed to be objective about it and not play favorites and if you start reviewing then you start revealing your biases and yea, I love Call of Duty and I think Medal of Honor sucks. Well, then you just told Activision that you favor their product and told EA that you diss their product, right? And so you reveal the bias in your reviews. And then there is cover the industry type journalism. And increasing you

are seeing, well in that there is gossip journalism, who out there and you know, there is, gossip journalism is about personal and professional discord and people who have and just actively move from one place to the other. Then there is covering the business journalism and there is also a <unintelligible> feature of journalism when you are writing stories about video games as an art form. You know, the way we write about books, movies, and music and art, photography, whatever. And with games being recognized as their own art form you are seeing a lot more of that coverage. So that can overlap with review and the really really sophisticated reviews talk more about not just the game and what you do on level 27 to beat the boss but they talk about how the game itself is important to culture and what does it contribute to the art form, what does it say about us as a culture, you know as an anthropological artifact, you know? I know it's kind of high faluting but you read every Pauline Cord and Anthony Laine, the people who are really the masters of review and the reasons that they are so great and interesting is that they have a great voice, right? And they're really really interesting and fun to read and they are really insightful you learn. You learn stuff, not just about you but you learn stuff from reading them. You know, like Danielle who is covering, who is reviewing cars <unintelligible> for us, he can write about rubber bands and I would read it because it would be so good. And that's what game journalism reviews need to evolve into. Something beyond the fanboy rant for it to gain mainstream acceptance. S I am rambling totally.

BTJ: When you were talking about there are two types of video game journalists and when you are writing about the news side and industry side, does balance come into play? Is that something you have to think about a lot?

SB: Yeah. Balance comes into play when you analyze a new situation and every decision you make there is a question of balance. Who do you call? That is a question of balance. If you forget to call the other person then you may appear imbalance. How do you react to the news personally? Like, Oh those fuckers, I can't believe they did that and then you have to check that reaction, right? And then your word choice too of course. Not to impact your word choice but you don't want to go too far. But balance is really important because you, what you want to do is you want to give people, your main objective is to give people a full picture of what happened so they can walk away with, so two readers can read it and walk away with completely different but informed conclusions, right? So I can read your story and walk away saying, ah man, Bobby Kotick at Activision is just a mother fucker and then someone else can read the story and say Bobby Kotick is a really savvy business man, he really know how to make money. They can read the same story and walk away with some reaction and then they can cite reason based on the content of your story, right? That's the ideal. It's the ideal to keep in your head though it's not always doable, you can't always accomplish that but it's always good to keep in mind.

BTJ: Do you ever feel like it is your job to keep the industry in check, to keep them honest type of deal or do you ever feel like when maintaining a relationship that you pull back, if someone is acting skuzzy to protect the customer by writing about it or have to worry about the relationship?

SB: Yeah, that a really good question, it really is. It depends on how you do your job. If you want to go into it with a crusade mentality then definitely you should definitely be on the lookout for a story like that. Me, I'm different. I'm kind of about telling stories about the industry that help inform your public about what's going on. How does this work, who runs the big

<unintelligible>, how it operates, you know, why it's important. Of course when I run across something that I think is wrong I write about it. It's not my core mission. I don't see it that way. A lot of people out there do and they're like the Dan Rathers of the world or the CNN guy, Cooper...

Me: Anderson Cooper

A: So those guys deal with and breath that stuff and if you are built that way, you know, more power to you. I'm not, you have to stick to your strengths. My strength is finding out how things work and explaining it and then understanding how things fit together and explaining them and trying to write interesting stories that people might want to read and surfacing that. These are my strengths. My strengths aren't about muckraking or bringing the bagpipes to court and there is definitely room for both. And I think the people that want to do the muckraking, there are too few of them they are kind of a special breed. For me, I think people pretty much know that I'm here to tell a story then I will write it up but it at first has to be a story for me. It has to be important, it has to have some sort of narrative, it has to be interesting some how. So when I come up against a story, I, here's where balance comes into play, the second thing you have to watch out for is your credibility. If you give off the impression that you are out to get people and that you are going to nail them no matter what it takes and you aren't going to give them a fair shake then you burn bridges. But if you tell them, look, I've got this story that I think it's a story because of X, Y, and Z and I'm going to write about it and I want to give you the opportunity to talk about it and tell me why it's not such a bad thing or get the story from you point of view, you know, please do. I really want to sit down and speak with you. If you don't want to comment for whatever reason that's OK too, so long as I give them the opportunity to respond. They are a lot of companies and people that get tweaked because they think you lured them into a type of story and then you end up writing another. That's what can go wrong with a relationship. As long as it's a relationship, as long as you are up front with them about what you are doing from the very beginning then you are going to be OK. And if they are tweaked about it and they don't talk to you then it's not your fault, right? That's just what happens. You can't be in the business without having people that wont talk to you. There are more people who wont talk to you then who will talk to you. You go to think about what you can do. I can be as fair as I can and I can do everything I can to make them get a fair shake and beyond that you can't control.

BTJ: Is there ever a lot of competition between other journalists covering the industry, is getting the scoop important or even possible? Is there a lot of camaraderie?

SB: There is always that. You go to these events and you see the same guys over and over and they all know each other and they all hang out but there is definitely competition. A lot of those guys are online publications, they do things a little differently. I write about the industry trend and the people and the business trends and things like that, things like culture. What IGN and Gamespot thrive on is breaking the latest trailer, exclusive trailer, new announcement, which date for the newest launch. Every little detail about in game is of vital importance because there is a rabid group of people out there who will pounce on it and reward you with clicks if you get that right. It doesn't happen where <unintelligible>. It happens in the back office where you get contacts and sources, after hours if you are drinking buddies with them or play games over Xbox Live together or, that's where the competition really happens. Does that make sense?

BTJ: It does. What if someone calls you up and asks you for the correct spelling of a producers name or what is the date he said? Is that something you would help somebody with or expect others to help you with, or is it that intense of competition to where that wouldn't happen?

SB: I'm sorry, you mean fact checking?

BTJ: Something small like a date, not necessarily the theme of a story or anything. Kind of get your facts together, if another journalist called to get the correct spelling of a name. Is that something you would expect to happen?

SB: Oh yeah. I would totally help them out. I never get calls like that though because info is so easy to find on the Internet and people want to develop their own contacts that they make their own calls to those people. But yeah, sometimes they call each other out. For the most part for facts like they all want to do their own thing.

BTJ: I got you. Let me shift gears here real quick to the kind of second part. I want to talk about the interaction with the public relations workers for these companies. Do you have a lot of interaction with these people? Do they call you, send you gifts, offer trips, send threatening emails to write good things about them or send a lot of press releases?

SB: Yeah, I wrote a story many years ago about the junket that game companies put on for the reviewers and the reviewers are the ones you really need to be watching for because the reviewers can affect sales and they would lavish these things on them. Free trips, free hotel, free food, free everything. Everything is paid for, all expenses paid and they would wine and dine you. And it depends on your companies' policy whether they allow that or not. So what I did is I wrote a story about it and it went into the whole playola thing and it called into light, it's one of those stories about <unintelligible> because when people are wining and dining you and paying for \$5000 dollar trips that it's like politics. You can't be objective after you take part in all of that. You can have dinner with somebody and they pick up the tab one time and you pick up the tab another time, that happens. If you, and it doesn't call into question you're their purest, letting anyone pay for anything, that's OK too. I think the rule of thumb is would you be embarrassed if you were on the front page of the Wall Street Journal then don't do it. And if you are OK with that, go ahead but unless your company policy dictates otherwise, if your policy them you're busted. It doesn't matter what people think. You have acted against policy and that's it. They get paid a lot of money by game companies to corral game journalists together and do events for them and entertain them and cater to their every whim and all that. Then there is also this quid-pro-quo thing that happens with them too that gets a little dicey. Oh, we though we would have this conversation where we thought we had a good relationship and we got you out here and everything was fine and then you write this story and then it gets <unintelligible> and you just invested \$100,000 in an advertising campaign and that's not cool. Where would that leave you, what do you do in that conversation? That's not a good conversation to be having. Where with me, I never have that conversation. That has nothing to do with the advertising. Don't take things from them, I always say what I'm up to, I don't review so that's <unintelligible>. That's never a conversation I ever have to have and when you are small and a \$100,000 can make or break you, that's not fun. That's the danger there. For that you really have to talk to people who are in it like Digitilo, guys like that.

BTJ: So they don't contact you a lot?

SB: They do, I get phone calls all the time. If I go, I go on my own dime and I go to learn about the product and I then I go and maybe I'll stick around for dinner to meet the developers or something but I don't do the Disneyland trip afterwards or the bungee jump expedition afterwards, I skip out on those things.

BTJ: And so by doing that you don't feel obligated to do anything one way or the other?

SB: Yeah, I do whatever I want afterwards with a clear conscience. These guys more often than not do whatever they want also. I'm not calling into question their objectivity or their morals or anything but when you do take these guys up on their trips or special access, like, oh, we are going to have you talk to Pamela Anderson because she did the voiceover and then they all the sudden pull the plug on you based on advertising and access. Its just not <unintelligible>. With me, it's not a big deal if I don't get access to Pamela Anderson and so I end up never having these conversations with them and its kind of awkward. And then there are times when I know that they do. I know that advertisement pulls the plug on major ad campaigns or threaten to and then you have to talk to them and appease them and I don't know what you do behind closed doors but I know that stuff happens. Because I'm not part of that I can't really tell you , you kind of really have to talk to those guys.

BTJ: Yeah, I got a couple of them. Do you feel like they reach out to your editor a lot too, do you know?

SB: When they want to complain?

BTJ: No, if they want to influence or if they are trying to push a big product, do they contact your editors or send them gifts or invite them to make trips or see whatever kind of set up they have?

SB: They invite them but my editors never take them up on it. It's far easier for me. Editors can't afford to sit around and entertain everything that comes their way. They have six or seven reporters covering 10-12 to 14 different topics so they can't sit around and entertain every single pitch that comes along. See my editor, as with any different organization, my editor, it's simpler for them to forward it to me and have me decide what to do with it. Sometimes they might build a personal relationship with them and my editor might talk to them and then we talk back and forth but the thing is if it's a good story. If it's not a good story then I don't care. You can throw million dollar parties and nothing will happen. If it's not a good story then it's like, sorry dudes, it's kind of boring. If you do go work for a PR firm, you kind of have to manage your client that way. You can throw your million-dollar party but the rate of return is going to be pretty minimal. You kind of have to set your clients' expectations. There are PR firms out there that are very aggressive and they promise the world and all sorts of coverage and then they go out and they really bang the drum. You know they really hound you forever and they try and wield you and become your best friend and call in favors or whatever and these guys maybe get incrementally more because we want them off of our backs because they are such a pain in the ass. But we

really don't get too much from them. A good story is a good story no matter what and it depends not so much on how much money you throw at it but really how you think about it and how you pitch it, if you pitch it intelligently. And that's not something you can buy. I'm not saying there is no room for parties and events because it does engage some sort of social connection but it only creeps in. I'm not going to write about your new toilet paper brand because it happens to sponsor the World Cup. SO that's an entirely different conversation.

BTJ: Do you think when writing about video games and the industry that it should be held to the same standards as when writing about hard news?

SB: Oh yeah. It shouldn't be different than anything else. If you are writing about the oil industry, it should be the same thing. If you are writing about the movie industry it should be exactly the same and that's your protection too. If you give everyone that same treatment then they can't call bad on you.

BTJ: My last question for the day and thanks for sticking with me that long, What are your feelings on the state of game journalism today? Do you think it's on a good track, do you think it needs improvement?

SB: I think it's getting better and better. The people who wrote about games ten years ago are more mature now, they're more experienced, they're more informed, they are smarter. Many of them have kids now so they are pretty mature and thoughtful people now. The vanguard is getting better and better. More experience and as a result all game journalism is getting better along with them.

APPENDIX G
STEVE HOON CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Ben Jenkins 225-802-7216
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to see what effect, if any, the efforts of corporate public relations are on video game journalism.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The interviews will be conducted via skype, telephone, or by email, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Each interview is expected to take approximately thirty minutes.
8. Benefits: The benefit to each participant is to help study their professional fields and increase the field of knowledge on the topic.
9. Risks: There are no known risks to participants in this study.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: Writing “Yes” in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

_____ YES _____

APPENDIX H

STEVE HOON INTERVIEW

BTJ: You are at [redacted: company name] now, can you tell me about any prior journalism experience you might have?

SH: Yeah, before [redacted: company name] I worked at a local newspaper and cover the video game industry there and did a couple pieces and got some recognition and when [redacted: company name] had an opening I applied for it, got the job and then been there over four years going on five.

BTJ: Do you still write about anything other than the game industry?

SH: No, I do not.

BTJ: When you write your articles for [redacted: company name], is there a template you like to follow? Is every piece kind of its own thing?

SH: Well, [redacted: company name] is very structured probably compared to other outlets. We used to be a lot looser back in the day. I don't want to say because of how big the site has gotten we've had to be more aware of what we write because when we write something it gets everywhere in twenty minutes and that kind of, it's a weird thing to wrap your brain around but if you write something that is wrong you are going to get that email in twenty minutes and someone is going to be screaming on the other side of that line. I would still say that everyone has their own voice but as far as a template goes it's not AP structure, excuse me, I mean Associated Press. There are clearly things we do that are different from AP style but when we have to do certain nit-picky things we have to go fore AP style and try to keep it as structured as possible. Especially when it's something really depressing or it is business related, we'll usually do it straight and usually when we say straight we mean AP ish style.

BTJ: Can you give me a brief explanation of the creative process of the article?

SH: For us it is, we have behind the scenes structure where it used to be a lot more free for all just like if someone thought something they would just start writing it up. And over the years we would use a lot more structure now so we have internal things where we use and we choose form that or if we see something that the person who is in charge of keeping track of those types of thing what is going on then we go on. Can you say the question again?

BTJ: Repeat question

SH: There are a couple of different way. So one of the things is, it may come from another site and then we definitely source that other site. And if there is a piece of information that seems missing. A lot of times you will see something like, you might see on a site that blah blah blah has been delayed but they've got no corporate source, got nothing other than some random detail or website so [redacted: company name] policy pretty much at this point is to follow up on that and make sure that to try and contact publishers, try to contact the developer, contact whoever

can give you the yes or no answer. Will they give us the yes or no answers? Eh, it depends but at least you are doing due diligence and that's sort of become a main thing that we definitely do now or have been doing for quite some time. So that's usually the classic blog way that things happen. The thing that happens once we get a hold of it is not the classic blog copy, paste, throw it up there and just go with it. There are things that will happen behind the scenes once we get a hold of a piece of information like that. The other thing is tipsters. Tipsters are a lifeline. They give you so much information that it is unbelievable. Um and then it's just verifying that information. And most of our original work comes from tipsters because there is a group of us and we can't be aware of everything that is going on so usually the way we find out our original pieces and we thank them if we can or they're definitely our best way of getting original content.

BTJ: You had mentioned sticking to straight AP style, do things like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty play an important role when deciding what stories to write?

SH: Yeah, that's all journalism, that's all media. All media pretty much works on those fundamentals of timeliness, proximity and all that type stuff. For example, right now we just put up the post about the Xbox Kinect 250 gigabyte bundle being announced and we broke that story a month ago. And now it's official so the minute it became official we got that up as soon as possible. Several stories are in the hopper right now but that definitely takes priority because it's a news piece and it relates back to something that happened a little while ago.

BTJ: A lot, when people are writing of video games it is reviews, not all of it, some is news. What role does objectivity play? Is it possible to be objective and be free from outside influence?

SH: This is the part where it starts to get complicated. It's sort of what moves game journalism. God I hate that, it sounds so philosophical. There is a difference between being a journalist and a reporter and being a writer. There are people who would make the argument that you are still a journalist if you are doing reviews and previews then I might come around and be like that makes you a writer but then it's weird because I do very very few reviews and previews. I think I've only done like 3 reviews since I've been at [redacted: company name] and when you do reviews your reputation from doing all of these sorts of journalistic pieces and everything like that goes into your name being on that review so at that point in life, am I a writer or am I still a journalist? And there is no cut or dry answer for that at the moment. I now for myself I try to, I try not to do reviews and previews as much as possible because they are a time sink and usually I am better off working on some other piece like, you know, research, hunting something down. I've, research and hunting something down takes less time then a review does. So the cost structure on something like that is completely, I don't want to say broken but the amount of money you are paid for a review is sometimes, you could put that amount of effort into an actual feature or news piece and get paid the same amount if not more.

BTJ: Is that just because all the time it takes to play the title?

SH: Yeah, you're not sitting around watching a movie. You're playing a game and it takes, once again every outlet is different and I've never ever hear of a standardized system and, but ever, if you were being generous and saying ten hours, right? You have to play a game for at least ten

hours to get an idea of what the game is like. Ten hours! DO you know how much research you can do in ten hours? I could probably find out the deepest darkest secrets of Bobby Kotick in ten hours if I really put my mind to it. There is an awkward structure there because if you look at a movie critic, they sit down for two hours, bang out a review in an hour and a half after that. Their entire job is done in 3-4 hours, of course depending on the length of the movie blah blah blah but you know what I'm saying. The time there is completely different in that field and the same thing goes for a music critic. What's a CD, like seventy minutes?

BTJ: How important is balance when writing?

SH: Yeah, I don't know how other outlets do it. I don't know how people on staff do it but I try to contact those involved and get a statement. In the end it also helps round out the piece better. It gives balance to stuff. If one person says one thing and the other person is saying another thing then that usually helps peoples' perception of objectivity. It's definitely weird reading sometimes in the comments that game journalism or on twitter. People talk about game journalism, they don't know, it's the idea, it's like someone talking about being a doctor or talking about being a lawyer without actually knowing the structure that's going on behind the scenes. Talk about it as much as you want but if you don't know the system going on behind the scenes then you don't know what's going on. So your question was about objectivity?

BTJ: Balance.

SH: When a news story comes, for me, most of the time I'm doing news pieces so for if I'm not following up with these people then that hurts my reputation and they're not going to pick up the phone if I try to call them. Here is the perfect example, I cannot even tell you how many times I've talked to PR and marketing folks. If I'm calling you, I'm not calling you for a free game, which is the universal joke in the industry. You know, if so and so is calling, you know, that other outlet they are calling you for the latest World of Warcraft or you know something along those lines, like they are looking for the free copy of a game like that's why they are calling you. And I make it very clear. If I'm calling you I'm not calling you for a free copy of a game, I'm calling you because I'm working on something and it would probably be in your best interest to pick up the phone and either talk to me off the record or let me know what's going on because here is this piece and we move really fast. Like this piece will be up in the next 20-40 minutes. It's in your best interest to pick up the phone and talk to me and let me know that like, yes, I can't say anything official right now but here's what's going on sort of thing. I guess that speaks to objectivity and everything.

BTJ: Do you feel you serve a watchdog role over the industry when writing?

SH: If I do, I usually edit it out (laughing). For me having covered a lot of business things I have that I will get personally, not involved, involved is not the right word. Not vested either, an emotional reaction. To basically watch a company destroy itself and being able to see step by step how this company is completely blowing itself up and that the people in charge are going to be millions of dollars, MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, when this company destroys itself. I would say that's the one time I get into more of an aggressive stance because I know how this is going to play out and it's completely depressing. You see it happening like two years in advance and

every piece just leads up to that moment that you know is going to happen. And then of course, the company collapses and all these executives make millions of dollars and everything like that and then get picked up by another outlet. And then my joke is always that nobody Googles when they hire these executives cause if you Google half of the names you know that they come from failed companies. I don't understand how that works. Who hires these people that destroy, destroy, and not just making an oops, we are talking about full-blown destruction of companies. You know, hundreds of jobs lost and they'll get picked up by the next company that comes along trying to get into the industry. Disney, and Warner, they have picked up a bunch of executives, Microsoft has done the same thing. I'm saying these names and it sounds like I am singling them out but it is across the board. There are so many executives in so many high positions right now who come from companies that have failed. If they didn't understand the industry before but yet they keep somehow getting jobs. So, clearly that's the one time that I get a little irritated.

BTJ: You had mentioned earlier how you were the first to break the Microsoft Kinect bundle and how you did it again this morning. Is getting the scoop pretty important?

SH: Getting the scoop is always important in every media outlet. Getting the scoop yes, getting the exclusive has a very different tone in this industry. I don't know what it's like in other places, in other entertainment journalism areas but exclusives has a very different term and tone here than scoop. Was the Kinect bundle a scoop? Yes. Was the USB storage stuff a scoop? Yep. Were some other things that we've also done over the years usually pretty consistently scoops? Yes. Do we get exclusives? Nah. We're not that often in the exclusives business, which is basically being spoon-fed a piece. That doesn't happen very often because I guess, I don't know. Perhaps of who we are or whatever it is but yeah, we don't usually get the quote, exclusive. You know what the difference is?

BTJ: Yes. If you do get a scoop in today's fast paced technology, how quickly does someone else catch up to you?

SH: If it's a scoop, that usually means no one was paying attention or we know something that someone doesn't know and then we try and do our best in getting the uh, usually the only time we get scooped on the scoop is when we are doing research and it turns out the tipster who sent us the tip also sent it to another outlet and then they decided not to do the research and just put up the tip by itself. And then we'll get scooped because we are doing our research and someone else just tossed it up. So there was one example maybe two years ago where I know, I was working on something at the exact same time another outlet was and they beat us by twenty minutes. But when our piece went up it had two more quotes that filled in what was actually going on. So they were missing whole chunks of the story. They beat us by twenty minutes but we had a lot more detail.

BTJ: Is there much camaraderie amongst game journalists? If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?

SH: If I knew him then of course, that's not a big deal. Also we would hope that he would Google the guys name first and check it up online. Like hey, what was the name of that game? Well, did you check Google? Do you not know how this job works? But yeah, like Google first.

SH: Oh yeah, going back to your thing about exclusives. The other thing that, this has been a joke for years now. There is not such thing as an exclusive on the Internet because five minutes later, ten minutes later, it's everywhere. So this idea of the exclusive it's still a silly old term old terminology. That's why when we are discussing scoops and exclusives that they're very different beasts. Plus, an exclusive, this is the best part, there is an online exclusive and they make that an exclusive with print outlets and stuff like that. So you might get the exclusive and have, lets be generous. Lets say a 9 a.m. Pacific embargo time on that exclusive. Well if they gave it to the New York Times they are about to scoop you by or they are going to beat you by whenever the print edition comes out or whenever they update the website. So you get beat. Classic examples of this are pretty much any E3 about prior to three years ago. There would always be, they would always contact outlet and let them in on everything that was going to be at the press conference and then at the same time they would give all of this information to they New York Times and the Washington Post or whomever and so in the morning of that E3 press conference the New York Times or the Washington Post or whomever had all of the information and had it all out there. We had all of the information as well but we were under an embargo until a certain time so you would have to report that the New York Times reports blah blah blah. It would be ridiculous because you couldn't break your embargo but you now all of the information was factual. Another sort of, this actually doesn't relate but another example this year was when we had the name of Kinect like a week before the announcement was made and we couldn't confirm it. That was the one problem. We had the document, we had a really good source like we had everything we just couldn't get it completely nailed down to put it up on the site. And then USA Today decided to run the story four hours before the cirque de Soleil event where they were going to announce the name and it's kind of like, great, USA Today is gonna give the information. Fine, great.

BTJ: And so then you to say USA Today as a source?

SH: Yep! USA Today reveals the name of Kinect or something like that. That's the way it works. Which it also is hilarious because it doesn't work in reverse cause I've had the Boston Globe steal a few of my pieces through the years without any like sourcing whatsoever. Basically what they did was follow up on something that I had done and got the same people to say similar things and then reported it as original. Like, that was frustrating cause there was no way they could of known without the piece going up on [redacted: company name] sort of thing.

BTJ: I'd like to shift gears a bit to talk about the PR aspect. I'm interested in how the PR of studios interact with game journalists. Are there any written rules at [redacted: company name] that say how you should interact with them?

SH: No, the main policy we have is we don't accept junkets or major gifts. And I think it's questionable how many other outlets have a junket policy. But I think, I'm certain several others of them have the gifts policy. So no junkets which basically means no paid travel anywhere and there are some pretty extravagant travel things that occur in this industry.

BTJ: yeah, I've read about a couple in my research.

SH: Yeah so that is our longstanding policy that we don't accept junkets.

BTJ: You said they don't accept big gifts but I now that whenever big titles come out these...

SH: No, I mean like big screen televisions, hookers, cars, that type of stuff. That's what I'm talking about like, I say extravagant gifts. The game? The game is not an extravagant gift. The game is, here is the game, review it and then we give it away anyway as part of our schwag. Anyway you can just do schwag and you basically see a list of what we give away and then typically at our E3 party or whatever when we have a major event all the guys bring a suitcase of the stuff they have been given over the year and we just give it out. There is a photo from E3, 2007 or 8, you can just Google it, it will probably be under the [redacted: company name] party and you'll just see a table full of stuff and that's all our junk, all our games and everything else we received over the year.

BTJ: Are there any unwritten rules you stick to?

SH: No, no. Once again, every outlet is different. I can't speak for anyone else. I mean there are some dark dark stories but once again I can't speak to what other outlets do.

BTJ: And whenever you are writing an article that might be critical a company or product, are you mindful of your relationship with that company?

SH: I'm always mindful of the audience first, of the readers because basically there is a legion of fanboys. That is definitely one of the funniest things about this industry is that these companies have legions of people that defend them. Like for no reason whatsoever. So I learned to write a long long time ago in such a way that I would think about, OK, what are the fanboys going to say about this and if I do say anything critical, that thing is always linked and you'll notice that definitely in my style for sure that if there is anything critical or anything that needs back up I will always always link it. Because it proves exactly what I am saying because otherwise they try and say (acts out people being mad) and like, no, it happened, look. But if you don't link it then they don't know. You always have to assume that someone is coming into a story for the first time. They don't know the full narrative which is sort of the unusual thing about writing in a two paragraph or three paragraph is that in classic newspaper writing you have your nut graph, you have your quote and then you basically spend the next eight paragraphs, and there are a few people who do this, basically using the next eight paragraphs rethinking all the old stuff from the last three months or the last six months. And that's not the way we work. The way we work is here's the news, maybe you quote, or hers a little bit, the second graph and the third graph is the background and it has the information that if you go down the path, you'll learn everything in the narrative to that point. Does that make sense?

BTJ: Yeah, it does.

SH: So yeah, you always have to assure that someone is coming into the story for the first time and link properly so then they can follow along. Like, who the hell? Why are they picking on one guy? This seems really out of place. If you follow the links it starts to become clear like why are you picking on this person, why are you picking on the game, why are you picking on this company? And it, a few hundred people get fired here, a company collapses there. The picture starts to become clear if you follow the links back.

BTJ: Have you ever been influenced to write a story a particular way or to change a story?

SH: That's part of the conversation process. So, my original works are changed all the time. That happens at every newspaper. That happens everywhere. That's what a copy editor does. They will change things to fit the structure of the outlet. So, does my stuff get changed all the time? Yeah, it gets changed all the time. Does it get changed for the better? Hmmm, it depends on your perspective. But yeah, there is constant editing that goes on. Have I ever been like, walked into the office and been like, or virtual office, and then thrown a coffee mug across the virtual room and it smash against the wall? No. Like in the end I usually agree with the edit. Typically it softens what I have to say. So in the end the person is usually doing it for the better.

BTJ: Do game companies have a lot of influence over editors?

SH: Once again, speaking as [redacted: company name], or I can't speak for [redacted: company name], I can only speak as a freelancer that happens to work there, any influence... no, I'll just go with no. I'm unaware of there being influence from the companies or anything along those lines because we don't, we only recently started doing reviews and reviews are where PR, marketing, and money is, I mean bonuses tied. If you give the game a bad review that PR company is not going to get that thousands and thousands of dollars bonuses. You know, if it gets below and 80 on Metacritic. So, this is something we don't really deal with. Most of time whenever I had to deal with PR or along those lines it was because of something news, news wise that I wrote and in almost every single circumstance my editor, my ESE, had stood up for what I had written cause it was accurate and that was the end of that.

BTJ: In your opinion do you think news journalism and video game journalism have the same rules? Do you think it should be held to the same standard?

SH: Yeah, for us, it's a lot of the same rules. Like, the funny thing is that sourcing wise we even have stricter rules. And I've definitely seen this over the years by watching mainstream news outlets just completely straight up steal our stuff. The funny thing is that outlets like Reuters or AP have actually quoted us before and used our terms and they are cool about everything which is funny because they are the big wire service and everything like that. I mean these are, I've definitely seen non-gaming newspapers not even industry magazines just straight up steal stuff. So sourcing is something with all the trash talk about, 'Oh, the internet steal content.' I've seen not just us but other outlets be very aware of sourcing because if you don't source then someone is just going to skip right over even reading your stuff or they will figure out some way to do it themselves and not acknowledge you at all. So sourcing is very very very important. Beyond that, once again I can't speak for other outlets, for us we try and do follow up. We try and do our best to give, if there is a need for someone else to elaborate, we try and do our best to get them to

do that. And most of the time you will see it turn out on the site as we are still waiting to hear back from blah blah blah or 'we don't comment on speculation' or 'we have nothing to announce at this time' but I mean that shows you we really tried. Considering it's really dickish is you'll sometimes see that we are following up for information and then the story will go up on the site and then, of course, remember that twenty minute rule I was talking about before, like news being everywhere in twenty minutes? Like five minutes later it will be, 'hey, here is that quote you were looking for.' Like, we have been sitting around for five hours, you know. Now of course it is up on the site, now it's real and now they have to respond. So within five minutes it's like, OK, here is that quote you were looking for and then you will update the story and then you will always, always, always get that commenter who turns around and says, 'why did you put the story up then if you were just going to update it five minutes later. Like you couldn't just wait ten minutes for them to show up?' And this goes back to the entire, you have no idea what goes on behind the scenes. No clue. Somewhere someone says something like that. They have to recognize that we did wait, we did. We did due diligence, we used to give them as much opportunity as possible and they were just not going to respond. So we went with the information we felt comfortable with and put it on the site and then, oh, five minutes after it's on the site then they are comfortable to make a statement on the subject.

BTJ: Right, now they see it in print they get nervous.

BTJ: One last question, how do you feel about the state of game journalism as it is today?

SH: I'm comfortable with the direction that it's going and the core group of people that are doing it are getting older. They've been doing it for a while. They have an idea of what, there are some folks who actually get into game actually want to do it, not just use it as a stepping stone or a door into PR or marketing or some other industry sort of thing. They are actually kind of passionate about what they do, then that's sort of the issue. There's folks now that actually have journalism degrees, holy wow! I don't want to say that's a requirement but that it's important because you know if you have journalism, one of the first things you learn is you take those ethics classes and then you know you have to do all those styles of reporting and it all comes in handy and you learn about shield laws. If you have the knowledge you can be like, no, go away, this information is accurate, you can't do anything to me, you know? You are protected by shield laws. You know where you stand and a lot of the times folks didn't know that type of stuff, or then it gets into the sort of dark territory of advertisements and sallies pushing someone to change the way something was written because the ad person is going to pull, which we don't really run into at all. SO, yeah I think it's on a good path. There's a lot of naval gazing which I do not get involved in. that's actually what upsets me is the naval gazing especially the naval gazing from the folks that exist in a place that no longer exists. Does that make sense?

BTJ: I'm not familiar with the term naval gazing.

SH: It's basically like talking about, it's game journalists talking about game journalism.

BTJ: OK, I got you.

SH: That's naval gazing. There are some folks who really do it a lot and the folks that do it a lot come from a world that no longer exists. The way the industry is covered has changed and they still live in a world where it's like, the whole San Francisco mafia. Everyone lives in San Francisco and they all party together and hang out together and everything like that and you're all friends. That world exists for some of those outlets but for a lot of us, that don't exist. You look at some of the major websites, look at Joystiq, look at Kotaku, look at Destructoid. We're all over the place. Joystiq is east coast, Kotaku is all over the place too, Destructoid is all over the place too. When you don't have that sort of thing where your partying all the time and your ad sales are dependant on keeping chummy with these folks then I don't know, it's weird. It's also weird to be criticized for doing actual work when it used to be mostly about, 'here's that exclusive came in with a little silver platter with all their information for you. Can you please write that up? Can you put that on the front cover?' So their world doesn't exist. It's changing and it's changing really, really rapidly. What it turns into is anyone's guess. But that's, I'm comfortable with the road that covering the industry is currently on because it is going to be a lot more people who want the story and will sort of go and find the story and they will go and... just covering the business side of the industry. It used to be Gamasutra used to be the only one that would cover the business of the industry and now when there are layoffs or when some CEO changes, you'll see that on Joystiq, you'll see that on Kotaku. It's not just, here's the latest review score, bing! So yeah, I'm comfortable with it. It's more full bodied, is that a good word? Encompassing? No that's not the right word either. Here's why I have a thesaurus. A thesaurus is your best friend always.

APPENDIX I
LAUREN CALLAWAY CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Ben Jenkins 225-802-7216
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to see what effect, if any, the efforts of corporate public relations are on video game journalism.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The interviews will be conducted via skype, telephone, or by email, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Each interview is expected to take approximately thirty minutes.
8. Benefits: The benefit to each participant is to help study their professional fields and increase the field of knowledge on the topic.
9. Risks: There are no known risks to participants in this study.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: Writing “Yes” in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

YES

APPENDIX J

LAUREN CALLAWAY INTERVIEW

BTJ: Do you have previous experience in journalism before your current job?

LC: I've had a few different roles in my career, but I've always covered gaming.

BTJ: Do you write about anything other than video games?

LC: Yep, I do a little music journalism here and there, and I also write about digital culture a bit too. I write fictionish stuff for fun, but not publicly.

BTJ: When writing your articles, do you follow some sort of template?

LC: Nah, not really. I also do numerous different kinds of articles, from news reporting to blogging to criticism, for many outlets that all have different styles. The only "template" I follow is put the information in the correct order and make sure the intended information is conveyed logically.

BTJ: Can you give me a brief rundown of the creation process for an article? Where does the idea for an article originate, how is it decided who will write it, what are the roles of editors, etc.

LC: I come up with all my own ideas. At [redacted: company name] we are each fairly autonomous; I get ideas based on what's happening around me, whether that's because I see some industry facet worth pursuing further information on, or because I notice a wider trend emerging that I want to comment on. In terms of my criticism and more consumer facing work, it's as simple of thinking of what I want to say and writing it. When I write for other outlets, like Kotaku, I discuss my ideas with the editor there, Stephen Totilo, and he offers feedback on how he'd like to see them focused or refined. At [redacted: company name], people proofread one another's work in a peer context and offer input if they think it's necessary; at other sites, the editor will generally change or ask me to change things they have questions about or think will make the piece stronger. Stephen and I typically work together on a few different drafts of my Kotaku features, for example.

BTJ: Do factors like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty play an important role when deciding what stories to write?

LC: Absolutely. My job is to inform and engage my audience, and when something isn't poignant or relevant or current it's not very useful. Everything needs a purpose.

BTJ: Is there any particular way that you like to approach a story?

LC: Eh, not really. I just kind of start writing it, sometimes I interview individuals involved first and write down what they say so that I can incorporate it into a wider story, sometimes I finish the article first and decide it needs something more and solicit quotations from relevant sources.

BTJ: Is objectivity important when writing? Even when writing game reviews, how important is objectivity? Are you free from outside influence to be objective?

LC: It depends on what you're writing. Objectivity is essential to journalism – it's about facts, not my personal opinion or speculation. But I think there's a lot of value in personal experience when writing criticism, since games are experiential. I do place a lot of focus on being free from outside influence whether I am writing from a place of critical opinion or of objective fact. I think an objective game review is impossible; part of the reason I no longer write reviews in a traditional format is because of the odd expectation that such a complex entertainment medium can somehow be evaluated against ill-defined metrics as a traditional 'product'.

BTJ: What role, if any, does story balance play when writing about industry news?

LC: It's quintessential. If you are reporting a fact, you must, at least, give every side of the situation the opportunity to comment.

BTJ: Do video game journalists serve a watchdog role for the industry? If so, in what function?

LC: I think that journalists in every medium have an obligation to closely examine every facet of the industry, and look for opportunities to question the status quo and bring conflicts to the forefront where they find them. In that respect being a 'watchdog' is a consequence, but for myself as a critic and a trade reporter, I never saw it as my role to press the industry to adhere to any specific standard. Being a 'watchdog' implies an agenda; I just report the facts and I let my audience judge whether something is appropriate or not. For consumer reporters it might be a little bit different, because their job is to see how well games and the companies that make them are serving their players.

BTJ: How important is getting a scoop on a story, whether it is information about an upcoming title or any industry news? How important is the exclusive?

LC: Maybe I'm not much of a journalist but I never really put a lot of weight into dirt digging or bargaining for exclusives. If I am the first person, or I believe I am, to learn about something, I certainly move with speed to try and get it published. The feeling of discovery, and the credit for discovery is nice.

Largely, though, I'd rather develop content thoroughly and accurately than quickly. There are so many websites writing game news that word travels fast and no one really knows who is "first" and there is no clear benefit to being five minutes faster than someone else. Rather than trying to be "the first" or "the only", I try instead to produce the best and most thorough reporting, or to develop an angle on an event that others haven't considered.

BTJ: If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?

LC: Totally. Again, this is the internet age. We're not "selling" anything. Everyone generally develops access to the same information at the same time, so you gain no advantage by competing on small details. You compete not on HAVING the information, but on the fashion in which you present it and the way you handle the subject matter. What on earth do I gain by not helping?

There is a lot of pride in journalism. Each of us wants to be the best at what we do; everyone wants to have all their bases covered, and so it's a little embarrassing to need to ask for help from a peer. The submissive party feels bad not being able to do their own work on their own, so why rub it in?

Also, nobody benefits from misinformed reporting. It can even be destructive, and I would rather just help someone get their facts straight than see misinformation spread to consumers or investors.

Journalists from other media often contact me for help; they've been assigned to write a games story and it's not their primary world, and in that case I'm very happy to help, because my contribution helps ensure that a story for a different audience will portray the industry correctly and in a rich way.

BTJ: Are there any written rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

LC: There should be! There are plenty of unwritten rules – if you feel you would "owe" a PR person coverage in exchange for some promotional material they give you, don't accept it; basically, that you never "owe" coverage for anything, even if you should become friends or friendly. Their job is to develop a good relationship with you; your job is to employ the information they offer you and write the story you want to write regardless.

BTJ: Are there any kind of unwritten rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

See above. A lot of game writers will frown on journalists who accept free games or promo swag, or who attend sponsored events or who accept press junkets, because they think that participating in media schmooze can make a writer feel more favorable toward something than they otherwise would. At best, those kinds of PR butter-ups cause me to pay attention to something I would have not looked closely at otherwise – but that's their objective. A good PR person understands that none of those endeavors guarantee that the writer will like the product or company they represent; a good journalist understands this, too.

Unfortunately, a lot of people desperately blog their way into "games journalism" because they're just crazy about the game industry and want to be closer to it, and once they get a few press passes they're sold easily on company messages just because, like, some major game publisher paid attention to them for a minute and they feel special. They then pass that enthusiasm onto their readership, who is under the impression that what they're reading is real reporting or objective writing.

The fact that everyone and their mother thinks they are a “games journalist” makes my job very hard. People without credibility can do a lot of damage on a wide scale to people who have worked very hard to earn credibility.

Don’t get me wrong – I get excited ALL the time when I see creators I admire, or when I’m getting my first look at a product I’m looking forward to. My personal preferences definitely play into what I gravitate toward and how closely I cover it – but I’m a journalist and an experienced critic. My opinions are qualified, in that way. But there is nothing PR teams can do to “sell” me on something I’m not intuitively interested in or couldn’t argue for the merit of.

BTJ: In relation to your journalistic work, what kind of interaction do you have with public relations workers from game companies?

Examples:

Do they call you?

Internal PR?

LC: Definitely. Most know by now that I prefer to do business via email, but when there’s an urgent story about a company, often someone will call me to give me a heads up or set me up with an interview on an announcement on short notice.

BTJ: Do they send you gifts?

LC: No. Materials I receive from game companies are usually promo materials – they will try to send me cute and funny things related to their game with the intention of charming me into looking into something or simply making sure the thing is on my radar. But it’s not like, “presents” or tokens of favor, they are usually things related to a product launch.

BTJ: Do they bring you on trips?

LC: This happens, but I have never gone on a trip that was paid for by a publisher.

BTJ: Do they send you threatening emails?

LC: I have had only a couple, related to unfavorable reviews (back when I wrote them). An agency may press a writer to “reconsider” their review or imply that they will not offer interview or review copy access to a writer who does a negative review. I think this happens less and less, thanks to prominent examples where the writer spoke up in public about the threats or the “blacklisting” – and the company received an enormous backlash as a result. There’s no question, for example, that sales of Kane & Lynch suffered because of Eidos’ bullying of Jeff Gerstmann and that whole fiasco.

BTJ: Do they send you press releases?

LC: They sure do! More than I’d ever be interested in reading, every day and night.

BTJ: When writing an article that is critical of a product or an event, are you mindful of the relationship between you and the company you are writing about?

LC: Not exactly. I feel that if I use neutral language and stick to the facts, the company can be made to understand why I'm writing what I write. —Most- companies are sane and don't expect that everyone is going to like something they do. They consider media reactions as an important part of their learning process, and are simply watching for reactions that they take seriously, rather than shooting for universal good press at all costs.

But for me, being conscious that no one will perceive hostility or 'agenda' in my work isn't kid-gloving my relationship with the company, it's just fair journalism.

There are exceptions, however. Having good relationships with major companies are essential to me being effective at my work. If I am developing a story that I think will be perceived by the company as being highly negative, I am extra careful to make sure that the story exists for a good reason and it is well-supported. I wouldn't risk alienating a major publisher, for example, over some anonymously-sourced minor issue that I couldn't verify. I don't stir the pot for its own sake.

BTJ: Are journalists ever influenced to write a story in a particular way because of outside pressure? If so, where does the pressure come from? How so?

LC: They try all the time. A lot of times PR people will say that you can interview the person that you'd like to speak to, but they tell you what topics that person can and can't talk about. That's just the way it goes, and unfortunately you can't really do anything about that. It's important to respect the access you get; it's usually about a compromise, and clever writers can find ways to show the facts they want even if the company won't discuss them.

Other times a PR person will pitch you a story or an interview opportunity and "suggest" what story you should write about their client. This is annoying and I ignore it.

It's good business to make sure that you and the public relations person are both on the level; when you have a good relationship with them, there is a mutual understanding that you both have a job to do. They want to protect their client; you want to get the relevant facts to your audience. Usually, again, there are some compromises, and again if you have a good relationship with the PR person and you're only writing the truth, you earn their trust that you're not arbitrarily "out to get" anyone and they will generally work with you to do the story you want to do.

BTJ: If you do change a story, what are the limits you place on what you are willing to change?

LC: I will make clarifications and I will correct things that are objectively "mistakes". If, say, an interview subject feels that their quote might seem misleading and I agree, I will accept a clarification to add on. I will not edit or remove anything I've written unless I have actually made a factual error or I agree with the person's assertion that it's misleading or unclear.

If someone said something without specifying it as off the record, they said it and it's in the piece. Sometimes I've had an interview with someone who's not well media trained and they may go off on a tangent and say something they shouldn't have, or they insult a competitor, or something that the marketers don't want in the article. Generally when I get off the phone (they listen in on these things) they will privately email me and ask if I could exclude certain things from the article.

In cases like that, it's a judgment call. Is what the person said actually important for the story? I'm much more willing to consider things off the record if there's no tangible benefit to the story in publishing them.

BTJ: Do game company PR workers influence editors or news organizations? If so, how much and how do they do it?

LC: I think it happens more at larger companies, where the sites host ads from the companies they cover. The industry automatically gets more leverage over the media outlet in those cases.

BTJ: Is video game journalism the same thing as news journalism? Should it be held to the same standards?

LC: Eh... it depends. I write on the business side, so I think the standards ought to be quite close. I'm not advocating anyone compromise their ethics or have low standards or anything, but I think if your job is to write about like... screenshots or freaking preview events or something, it's so stupid that people expect it to be like CNN.

BTJ: What are your feelings on the status of game journalism today?

LC: Eh. Like I said, a lot of terrible people making it harder for the handful of us who know how to do good work.

APPENDIX K
MIKE GARCIA CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Ben Jenkins 225-802-7216
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to see what effect, if any, the efforts of corporate public relations are on video game journalism.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The interviews will be conducted via skype, telephone, or by email, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Each interview is expected to take approximately thirty minutes.
8. Benefits: The benefit to each participant is to help study their professional fields and increase the field of knowledge on the topic.
9. Risks: There are no known risks to participants in this study.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: Writing “Yes” in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

___ YES _____

APPENDIX L

MIKE GARCIA INTERVIEW

BTJ: Do you write about anything besides video games?

MG: No, I do not.

BTJ: When writing, do you follow some sort of template?

MG: We don't adhere strictly to AP style guide or anything like that but we do try to follow a basic sort of news feel and that I try to get the sort of meat of the story first in a sentence or two and then try and get more detail as you go, sort of like a pyramid structure is the way I do it. Now, I should specify that I'm the news guy here and that 99% of what I do is just straight up news that's happening. That's how I approach news specifically.

BTJ: Can you give me a brief rundown of the creation process of an article?

MG: So, right now I'm the news editor. It's a lot different than assigning, I used to be features editor at a different Website. Is that sort of the approach you are looking for? A feature editor?

BTJ: No, I'm very interested in the news on a gaming Website.

MG: OK, I can just tell you what [redacted: company name] does, it's fairly simple. At [redacted: company name] we have as far as contract writers, I have six of them currently but you know that number might change at any given month. Most of them have been with us for a while and they're paid by the story. And, basically the way I have them set up right now is that I have my contract writers working on shifts so they each have a three hour shift during the day that they're on call and I will, or we all will, but for the most part I will be monitoring the news, I will be monitoring what's going on and if there is a <unintelligible>

BTJ: I'm sorry, I lost you there for a moment.

MG: Yeah, eventually I will be monitoring the news and what's going on and if there is something I want reported on [redacted: company name] then I will assign that lead either that story to whoever is on call at that time, it might be more than one person. That's how we do it essentially. You know I try to be the sort of central voice on what we report on and what we don't. And then I will assign the things I want to be on [redacted: company name] to my writers who are on call then.

BTJ: Do factors like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty play an important role when deciding what stories to write?

MG: We try to avoid tabloid style news. Like, some other publication will report stories, you know like, man convicted of robbing Xbox sentences, you know? It will be like reading police blotters or whatever to get those sort of stories. We avoid most of those tabloid stories. We try to focus specifically on news directly related to games or the game players and we'll avoid rumor

we don't feel are substantiated by anyone we trust. We will run rumors from sites that have a good track record or have good sources in the past but we try to avoid rumors like Amazon release dates for example. We don't tend to run those very often. And I can speak in this sort of language, you read enough game sites to know what I'm talking about, right?

BTJ: Sure

MG: As far as novelty stories, once in a great while, only, I'm here to <unintelligible> readers, you know, I'll run stories I think our particular audience would be interested in reading. And, so there is a fine balance of course because our audience would more than likely be interested in reading some stupid crap once in a while (laughs). I try to find the balance between what I feel is actual relevant new with what my audience want to review. Luckily I feel we have a community that's interested in going and keeping informed which is a great situation for me because that's all I really give a shit about.

BTJ: Is objectivity important when writing? Is it possible?

MG: Yeah, I'm very much for objectivity. If you didn't know, I'm fairly new to [redacted: company name], been here since April. There is a sort of a balance that we're still trying to find between being objective and having quote unquote personality in the news which is something I think that [redacted: company name] really has as its voice is a gamer personality. Personally, I am pretty strictly opposed to putting any opinion into an article that is in a section called news. I guess I am sort of old fashioned in that way. I think of news as being an objective report of facts. But that said, if you can cross that line and have personality without having opinion, without specifically stating an opinion then I'm all for that. It doesn't have to be a strict newspaper style of writing. You can have personality as long as you are not instilling your own view into it. Does that answer the question? I kind of forgot what the question was.

BTJ: Yeah, that's great. I was asking about objectivity.

MG: Yeah, yeah, I'm absolutely for objectivity but personality is also a plus.

BTJ: What about balance? Like the recent dust up between Activision and their studio who produced Call of Duty, was it important to contact parties from both sides?

MG: Well you know what's fortunate about a story that big is that you are going to get both sides sent to you no matter what, you know? Both sides are going to issue press releases with their sides of the story. But yes, absolutely. In an ideal situation where we do have the time and resources to do some good old-fashioned journalism, you know call people on the phone, it's absolutely important to get both sides. In the same way that I prefer that our stories have more than source, you know? Yes, it is important to get both sides but that said, there is a kind of larger more important conversation I think if you want to talk about the state of game journalism in that there are a lot of factors that prevent us from getting even one side sometimes, let alone two. And we can get into that later, I don't know if you have questions prepared for that sort of thing. Like, the challenges we face.

BTJ: If we have time at the end, I know you are on a pretty tight schedule here.

BTJ: Do you ever feel that you serve as watchdog of the game industry?

MG: I think we are doing a very bad job of being watchdogs for the industry. I think, I dream of the day where I feel like I am a watchdog for this industry. We do our best given our constraints but I don't feel that many publications do a good job of that. I feel that, I don't want to give specifics or talk bad about any of my colleagues but I feel that a lot of game sites, including ours, sometimes are in a strange way pushing the marketing initiative of game publishers and you know, just blindly running press releases about a publisher victory without really questioning them or figuring out what that actually means and again, ideally, once again, if we had the resources that we need (laughs) yeah, we should and could be better watchdogs than we are but as it is we are but not as much as I would like us to be. I'm not just saying [redacted: company name], I'm saying all of my fellow games journalists, all of our colleagues, all other publications. We do as much as we can, I just wish we could do more.

BTJ: Sure. What about getting a scoop on a story? How important is that?

MG: Yeah, we are speaking strictly of the Internet because that is where I work and haven't done print in a very long time. Our money depends on ad revenue of course and ad revenue depends on website traffic and website traffic depends a lot on referral links and the way you get referral links is to have something that no one else has so that they have to link you. If we get something before all of the other sites, if we get something exclusively that most of the other gaming websites don't have but would like to report on then they are in this situation where they have to link to us and we certainly benefit from that traffic and for that reason, yes, it's very important to get exclusives but beyond that it's important from an editorial standpoint to be that strong of a news force, you know what I mean? Like, for the readers it is important that we get scoops for them also. But yes, I would say it's still very important and unless we find the magic combination password or whatever that allows us to run a business that isn't dependent on referral traffic, so until that magical day comes, we are.

BTJ: Is it possible to get an exclusive these days?

MG: So the question was, is it difficult to get exclusives?

BTJ: Right.

MG: It is difficult to get exclusives from, directly from publishers, from you know, their public relations. It is difficult because a well know part of this industry. Exclusives are given to publications that publishers have good relationships with, that they feel they will get the most bang for their buck out of. Looking at the cover of every Game Informer ever will show you that. These are all exclusives to Game Informer. It's hard to get all of, to get exclusives just because publishers get to pick and choose, it's not often in our hands. We do occasionally get them. It's much easier certainly to get exclusives that aren't necessarily major game announcement. You might get an exclusive as far as being able to unveil let's say like a gameplay feature. If we are one of the first to see the game or we happen to ask the right question in interviews. That sort of

exclusive is in only that it requires some work as opposed to the game announcement exclusives which requires relationships that are sometimes questionable I think. I mean, again, scoops is a broad term. If I were to tell you the next Batman has Scarecrow in it, you know, is that a scoop? Does anyone else know that? You know? I'm not saying it does I'm just saying. But is that a scoop? But if that is considered a scoop then yeah, it just takes some damn legwork. It takes asking the right people at the right time. But yeah, the big answer to that is it is difficult because of competition amongst other outlets.

BTJ: If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?

MG: Yeah, I mean, I'm friends with many colleagues at other publications, I don't view the other publications as competition. I root for them, I think we're all in this together. I've worked with a lot of these people in the past and will probably work with some of them in the future. It's not a cutthroat environment as far as I'm concerned, game journalism. We all party together, we all go to the same stuff. I view them all as colleagues and friends. I hide, going to the term scoop, from someone until I publish it but no I'm here to help this field grow. I can't single-handedly advance games journalism. We are all in this together, we all love to improve this together and we are not going to do this by ourselves, we have to do that together.

BTJ: Does your company have any written rules for how you should interact with PR people from game companies?

MG: I don't think I have any defined rules other than common sense. You know, don't ask for free crap unless it's for business reasons. Like, I would be pretty steamed to hear my news writer ask a PR person for a free game or something, that's not allowed. We only accept games if it is to specifically review them or there's maybe a marketing tie-in to give them away to our readers or something. So if I were to have a rule then that would be a rule but no, I wouldn't say there are any guidelines for what to say when you email a PR person. You know, they are there to answer your questions about a story, to sort of get you the information you need and in an ideal world you ask them and you get an answer and that's an ideal world, they are there to answer your questions so ask them.

BTJ: You mentioned about getting games and stuff like that to review. Do you ever encounter where these companies will send these crazy gifts not just games but a lot of schwag or they'll invite journalists to go on these crazy trips to go shoot guns for some upcoming story or news release of Modern Warfare. You know, anything like that or I guess even pressures from PR people. Does that happen to you ever or often?

MG: It doesn't happen to me personally very often because they're now interested in, which most PR people <unintelligible>, and this is sort of a casual conversation, this isn't the an official [redacted: company name] response to this question or anything but as far as I can tell, the main priority of a PR person is to get review scores higher than they would be otherwise and because I have nothing to do with reviews, PR people have very little to do with reviews, PR people have very little to do with me. I don't get invited on special trips, I don't get huge gift

packages or anything. That said, we as a corporation rehearse the employees and we have rules against it cause I think gifts over a certain value. So there are rules in place and I would like to think even without the rules it wouldn't be accepting these gifts but they certainly do happen you know that's a whole other can of worms discussing whether getting sent, I don't know, a briefcase with a bunch of crap in it you know is going to affect a review score or not. I'm really not the person to ask that just because I don't encounter that very often at all. You know, all, all, I do on a day-to-day basis is what is happening and the actual facts of the news.

BTJ: If you writing an article that may be critical of a company or a product are you mindful of your relationship with that company?

MG: You know, luckily, at least at [redacted: company name], we are in a situation where we have, our bosses can deal with that sort of thing. We don't have to think about that ever. Our review scores, our reviewers are very honest, you know if they are critical they're critical, if they're not, they're not, but, we, no, we don't. As editors, as reporters we don't think about relationships. I've never stopped my news writers from saying anything because of any, because it might affect the relationship we might have, especially in news. That should never play a factor into it, ever. That's a big no no as far as I'm concerned. You don't think about that as you're an objective, we're objective reporters, we're reporting on things objectively and if the relationship or company is hurt by that then that's not our fault. We're reporting facts, we're not reporting opinions. Even when we are reporting things like in a review, it never plays a factor.

BTJ: Do these companies ever try and influence you into writing a certain way? Something like access journalism?

MG: You know, I've heard ghost stories about that happening but in my, how long has it been, six plus years doing this, I've never ever encountered that. I've never had pressure from PR people, I've never been threatened with information being withheld or anything like that. So I personally am not privy to anything like that and I've never heard a reliable story that I trust about that happening but I wouldn't be surprised if it does.

BTJ: Have you ever been made to change a story from editor or outside source through pressure?

MG: Again, I'm news and I certainly change stories based on feedback but only factual feedback, you know? Like I got a fact wrong or, yeah, I change stories. Certain factual changes and we try and be transparent as far as, we put on the bottom of the story what was edited and why. You know, we misrepresented this and this is the correction we made. No, I've never been, I would say, pressured for any reasons other than factual changes.

BTJ: Do you think that video game journalists should be held to the same standards as news journalists? For example news writers from the New York Times.

MG: I think as far as strictly reporting the facts, yeah, we should be on New York Times level of having our facts straight and reporting things accurately. What I don't think we need to hold us to is the level of writing quality as something like the New York Times, you know? I'm not saying I'm against writing quality or anything like that but the New York Times as an example,

they have much different resources than we have. They have a lot more time I would imagine, you know what I mean? So, in addition to that, that's more of a general population facing publication where something like [redacted: company name], I felt that the readers are more, have some level of understanding on these subject material so we can be a little terse if we need to. I mean, I think that answers your question. We certainly should strive for the factual accurate reporting of something like the New York Times, all news reporting should but a lot of us, especially on the internet and I think its true of most publications, video game or otherwise, don't have to adhere to the level of depth in each news article like the New York Times would. It's just a completely different audience, a completely different business model, completely different publication type.

BTJ: What is you opinion of the status of game journalism today?

MG: Yeah, that a big one. Le me kind of collect my thought here. So I think the state of game journalism, you know, it's not really games as much as all internet journalism, I would say we are all sort of facing the same challenge of making money, you know is the biggest challenge we have. And I do think that the state of all Internet journalism is suffering while we try and figure out how to make the most money we can and you know, be able to support ourselves. Most of us work below our means because we are so passionate about this industry and I think, I think the state of game journalism, is the quality of writing, the quality of reporting suffers because of our industry to make as much money as we should be making. I don't mean salary wise, I mean like the product itself. I think we are all suffering, lately especially, like any other website that is because its hard to make money on the Internet. And, I don't think that anything, The state of game journalism as it is right now, is perfectly adequate for the world as it is right now. Saying that, you can get online and find out what you need to know immediately. But that said, even, I can remember five years ago when I could write a longer, meatier feature and be compensated for it adequately and you know, five years ago that was true, at least in my experience, its not as true as it was and I do think that all internet journalism is suffering because there's, it's just so easy to start a publication now, there are so many out there and we all have to compete with each other to get the news out there quickly now before anyone else does unless we start losing precious traffic, that's how we make money. So, I think given the overall situation of the economy, we're doing pretty darn well for ourselves, all of game journalism. But it completely could stand to be improved.

APPENDIX M
ROBERT HAYNES CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

1. Study Title: Staying Objective: The Effect of Corporate Public Relations on Video Game Journalists
2. Performance Site: Skype, telephone, and email
3. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study,
W-F, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Ben Jenkins 225-802-7216
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to see what effect, if any, the efforts of corporate public relations are on video game journalism.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who do not report psychological or neurological conditions.
6. Number of subjects: 10
7. Study Procedures: The interviews will be conducted via skype, telephone, or by email, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Each interview is expected to take approximately thirty minutes.
8. Benefits: The benefit to each participant is to help study their professional fields and increase the field of knowledge on the topic.
9. Risks: There are no known risks to participants in this study.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
12. Signatures: Writing “Yes” in the blank below will imply consent. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225)578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

_____ Yes _____

APPENDIX N

ROBERT HAYNES INTERVIEW

BTJ: Do you have previous experience in journalism before your current job?

RH: Yes, I've written for publication since I was in high school working for the student newspaper. (I'm 30 now). After getting an initial taste for it back then, I decided to pursue a degree in journalism, which was my major in college. Shortly after graduating, I got a job as a reporter for a small weekly newspaper. I worked full-time at the newspaper for a little over five years before fully transitioning into self-employment on a full-time basis as a freelance writer in the gaming industry. During the later stretch of my stint as a reporter, I started freelancing on the side for gaming-related publications, and when that eventually grew enough to support a jump to freelancing full-time, I took the plunge. I now am self-employed and write about games on a freelance basis for about a dozen different top-tier gaming websites and print magazines.

BTJ: Do you write about anything other than video games?

RH: Beyond games, I have an interest in geek culture at large and music that relates to that in some way. While 95 percent of my writing these days is gaming related, I do write articles about other topics that relate to games in different ways, particularly on the musical end of things. However, those articles are mostly published in gaming-related outlets. I'm also currently working on the final stages of research and interviews for a book I'll be writing about the music of geek and gamer culture.

BTJ: When writing your articles, do you follow some sort of template?

RH: Not really. Having studied and practice journalism for a long time, the natural flow of working up a good feature just comes naturally – that's not to say it's a snap to fire off an article off each time. Some are harder to write than others. When you say article, I'm assuming you mean features, since reviews, previews, and interviews are a lot different. In any event, I start by doing basic research on the subject I'm writing about, getting in touch with experts or important individuals directly related to the subject for interviews and to gather further information. I then work it all together and pare it down to the best stuff I was able to find and work that into a cohesive article. That's pretty much what most folks do. Sometimes I write list style pieces and commentary article that are less interview/feature based, but most of the feature articles I write usually have research and original quote material.

BTJ: Can you give me a brief rundown of the creation process for an article? Where does the idea for an article originate, how is it decided who will write it, what are the roles of editors, etc.

RH: Sure thing. Since I'm a freelancer writing for many different publications, most of the articles I end up writing come from my own ideas and pitches that I fire off to editors. Coming up with a solid pitch idea that works for a specific publication is key to getting a feature assignment. Often times I'll come up with ideas that I'm really into and I'll work up a pitch for a specific publication only to find out they're not interested. I usually move on and try to re-tool

the pitch and feature idea for another outlet. I usually am able to get most of my feature ideas placed with assignments eventually, but some end up dying on the vine.

I'll break your question down a bit further. Ideas come from anywhere: articles I've read on a topic that I enjoy that sparks a different approach or idea that hasn't been done or done the same way, my own interests and trying to find a way to fit them into a format that would relate to readers of gaming publications (i.e. music that ties into game culture), and occasionally editors I work with regularly will get in touch and ask me to come up with a feature angle on some topic they deem interesting for their readership.

As far as who does what and the roles everyone plays: I usually have to do all the ground work to come up with an idea and present it an interesting way. I pitch that to my editors, either by e-mailing a formal pitch, firing off a short idea (for editors that are used to my work and know that I can deliver on what I promise), or hitting them up over instant messaging to bounce angles back and forth. Once they decide they want to go with one of my ideas, I generally get a formal "go ahead" on the assignment, a pay rate, and a deadline. From there it's pretty much up to me to do all the rest. I'll do any research needed, conduct interviews as needed, and then write the whole piece and get it in by deadline. From there, it differs from one publication to the next. I've had a lot of positive feedback on my writing from editors I work with (not to toot my own horn, of course!), and the pieces I turn in generally don't require a lot of editing or changing. I've had a few pieces partially re-written or substantially changed by editors in the past, but most of the time they just correct for any grammar slips, spelling errors if any slipped past my radar, and make minor tweaks to fit the tone and style of the publication. That's how it works from the writing end of things, since I'm a freelancer working remotely instead of being in an office with the editorial staff of a magazine.

Things work a bit differently in that kind of environment. Editors certainly do a lot of other work behind the scenes, but that's generally the interaction I have with them when working on stuff for assignment. For folks I work with regularly, I usually develop a camaraderie that comes from an ongoing working relationship, so they'll hit me up with stuff they want me to do, pass along assignments, chitchat when there's time, etc. Pitching and writing features is a lot different than doing reviews and previews. Those assignments often get handed out by editors, so someone will ask me if I am able and willing to cover a specific game, or they'll want me to hit them up regularly if a game crosses my desk and I want to review it.

BTJ: Do factors like prominence, proximity, timeliness, conflict, news-you-can-use, trend, or novelty play an important role when deciding what stories to write?

RH: Absolutely. Publication deadlines, available space, and newsworthiness/reader appeal are major factors when it comes to print features, columns, and other content. It's a bit looser for online publication, but editors still weigh out how much traffic or comment a piece when considering what to cover, since they're paying me whether it gets a lot of buzz or zero.

BTJ: Is there any particular way that you like to approach a story?

RH: I think I covered this in question 3, but I'll elaborate a bit. Topic-wise, I like to find ideas for articles that are off the beaten path. I dig quirky topics that might not have been done as much. There are certain topics (gaming-related music, indie games, etc.) that I have gravitated towards over the years and have written about enough to consider myself a quasi-expert on those areas of coverage....at least in the sense that they're my areas of specialty and I know and have written about them a ton.

Writing-wise, I usually start by poking around the web to see what kind of stuff has been written about the topic I'm writing and trying to find good potential sources to interview. I usually do some of this before even pitching an idea to make sure I can pull it off when I get a green light. I'll then reach out to individuals to interview about the topic. This tends to generate a ton of material to work with (usually a few thousands words of interview material for one article that'll ultimately be boiled down to 1,000 words or so with only a handful of choice quotes). I usually start out the writing phase by dumping everything I have (interviews, notes, and links to articles online) in a word doc. I'll save that, then open a second one where I paste all of the interview stuff in. I start from there...poring over the text to look for interesting points to discuss and possible excellent direct quotes to use in the piece. I'll sometimes set out a basic outline for the piece to setup a cohesive structure and flow for the article. Then I'll bash out the lead and start writing the rest afterwards. I often edit my own work as I'm writing, so I'll go back after I've written a few graphs and change things or re-write portions. I don't do as much re-writing after I've finished a piece, since I spend a lot of time on that throughout the whole process. Though I do go back and read it all again, check for errors, and massage any awkward sections out until they're smooth.

BTJ: Is objectivity important when writing? Even when writing game reviews, how important is objectivity? Are you free from outside influence to be objective?

RH: Objectivity in the gaming industry is a funny thing. Game journalism is largely considered enthusiast press. People covering the industry mostly do so because they absolutely love games and things that relate to games. There are certainly many game journalists who approach the subjects they're writing about in an objective way, it's hard to really call what we do entirely objective. We love (and hate) games, we're psyched to see what's coming down the pike, and we often have a vested interest in seeing the game industry continue to go on strong. Does that mean we're blind cheerleaders for everything gaming-related? Absolutely not.

Review writing is particularly interesting, because it's quite subjective. When tackling game review assignments, I approach each game with an open mind and a desire to dig into it, check out the experience, and then evaluate different areas of the game. As a professional, I take a serious approach to it and try to be fair and honest in my evaluations. But regardless of what my final evaluation of the game may be – what makes it awesome, sucky, mediocre, etc – there's going to be tons of people that just don't agree or have entirely different viewpoints. Reviews are essentially informed opinions, and not everyone is going to agree with them. But the idea is to have someone who knows what they're doing provide an expert opinion on a game after experiencing it. Folks (and gamers in particular) get all up tight about what scores games receive and often like to trash reviewers.

BTJ: What role, if any, does story balance play when writing about industry news? What about balanced sourcing?

RH: It's tricky, because gaming industry "news" is such a different animal from mainstream press. With the rise of big gaming blogs like Kotaku and Joystiq that take a more loose and lighthearted approach to news, it seems a lot of gaming outlets have followed suit by posting short daily "news" bits that are often just regurgitated and re-written blurbs of reporting done by other sites (and press releases). Often lacking original reporting, these lazy posts are often rife with personal opinion and commentary. As interesting as they are to read and as informative as they may be, it's a far cry from traditional, balanced news.

That's not to say there aren't gaming sites and publications that do a good job working up original news stories with fresh angles and actual reporting. The best will work to get opposing opinions and cover different bases in their news features, while the worst simply just rehash what someone else has written without adding anything new. I've even seen some sites just simply cut and paste another site's news story with a link. Awful. There's a lot of folks doing it right and a lot of folks that aren't. Either way, people read it and enjoy it.

BTJ: Do video game journalists serve a watchdog role for the industry? If so, in what function?

RH: I'd say so, yes. The game industry is a big booming business that's full of mega corporations and bigwigs pulling strings and making decisions behind the scenes. A lot of press folks will call things out – whether it's cutting through PR bullshit, calling B.S. on a game that was totally half-assed in order to make a quick buck, or exposing other problems in the industry. While gaming press is largely enthusiastic about the world of games, most writers and gamers are pretty opinionated and aren't afraid to call out stuff that doesn't "smell" right.

There are a lot of publications that tackle tougher, harder-hitting stories, whether PR and publishers like it or not. Sometimes it might get them blacklisted, but the game industry and press has a pretty connected relationship.

BTJ: How important is getting a scoop on a story, whether it is information about an upcoming title or any industry news? How important is the exclusive?

RH: Since I'm a freelancer and I don't see a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff at any particular publication, it's a bit tough to answer this. But generally speaking, getting the exclusive is a pretty big deal, and I believe there's a lot of behind the scenes jockeying for position between PR folks and mags. Game publishers desperately want to get positive, high-profile coverage of their top titles – either on the cover of big mags or in top slot positions in other outlets – and gaming outlets desperately want to fill their covers/pages/top positions with hot, juicy coverage about the biggest games coming down the pike.

That's sort of how it works in the print world. For online outlets that have a news-focus, breaking stories and being the first to get the scoop can net a TON of web traffic, particularly since other sites will often paraphrase and link back to the original story. So yeah, just like in

most other writing industries, getting the scoop is pretty key – at least for some areas of coverage.

BTJ: If another journalist called you up looking for information about a story you were both working on, would you provide them with help, even something as small as a date or the correct spelling of a name?

RH: Though the gaming industry is pretty big, the professional game journalism world is pretty small in comparison. There are a lot of young writers trying to break in, but many of the established writers for the larger print and online outlets know each other or at least are familiar with one another. We read each other's work, are many of us are friends and comrades, particularly in the freelance world. I regularly communicate with other freelancers and game journalists from around the industry through twitter, message boards, and e-mail. There's a lot of respect among fellow writers in the trade, for the most part.

I've always been willing to help out a fellow comrade whenever possible – whether it's passing along contact info for an editor, offering advice, or pointing folks in the right direction. That said, I'm not going to outright “hand over the keys” so to speak on a feature I'm working on. I'll certainly help out a bit if necessary, but without sacrificing my own reporting and article.

BTJ: Are there any written rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

RH: Written rules? No way. But there definitely is an unspoken code of conduct that serves as a general “good practice” rule of thumb. PR folks serve as the gateway to the gaming world for writers. They often hold the keys to interview access for high profile developers and corporate folks, they decide who gets sent review materials and other info, etc. I always find that being polite, professional, and friendly when dealing with PR folks (or anyone business-related) is good advice. You'll always run into some PR folks that are jackasses. Some use strong-arming, threatening, brow-beating, and other tactics when you do something they don't like. But most of them are decent folk that understand the benefit of having a good working relationship with the press – even when it comes to dealing with topics and stories that may not put their clients in the best light.

There's more to it than just being polite and friendly. I don't let PR folks sway my opinion or try to influence my coverage. I'm firm but polite on this. It's important to stay professional.

Some outlets do have in-house rules for dealing with PR, and it varies widely from one outlet to the next. Some don't accept swag or review copies from publishers, others prefer to have editors deal with PR instead of writers, some don't accept expenses-paid events (like flying out a writer to cover a game or event on the publisher's dime), etc.

BTJ: Are there any kind of unwritten rules about how you should interact with PR people from video game companies?

RH: See #11 for this one.

BTJ: In relation to your journalistic work, what kind of interaction do you have with public relations workers from game companies?

Examples:

- Do they call you?
- Do they send you gifts?
- Do they bring you on trips?
- Do they send you threatening emails?
- Do they send you press releases?

RH: I see PR folks as an important tool for getting access to coverage and review materials, but they're also human beings too. Developing working relationships with PR folks is important to this job, as it lets you get access to preview and review materials, get invites to demo and press events, and access to people who are often behind-the-scenes in the industry. In dealing with PR people on a regular basis, I have developed ongoing working relationships with them. These range from strictly straightforward requests (can we get a copy of X game to cover, or I need interview X dev) to relatively friendly (heard you had a bike accident, how are you feeling? And what's new?). If I work with the same person over a long period of time, it's easy to develop a professional friendship. That said, I don't hang out with PR folks outside of press events, and most of my communication with them is about work (friendly banter aside). I keep it cordial and professional.

I regularly receive press releases from dozens of PR firms for game publishers. And I'm on quite a few review copy lists, so early review and preview materials do show up on my doorstep weekly and monthly – whether I've requested them or not. Most of the time I write PR folks requesting specific materials for assignments I'm working on. Other times they just send stuff. Usually it's just games. Sometimes they throw in other weird swag or knickknacks like figurines, shirts, and whatnot. While some writers keep that stuff, I usually just pass it along to someone else or throw away. While I do keep some of the games I've been sent to hang onto down the road to play for fun or just have on file in the event I need to go back and refresh my memory when a sequel comes out, I usually trade in the others for store credit at places and use those funds to purchase review materials I need for assignments when I don't have access to review copies.

BTJ: When writing an article that is critical of a product or an event, are you mindful of the relationship between you and the company you are writing about?

RH: Yes and no. I don't pull punches if a game sucks, even if I have a positive relationship with the PR folks/dev/publisher. I try to be fair and reasonable. PR folks don't take usually take it too personally if you're writing a negative review of a game that has issues, since they often know it's got problems. Other times they may get ripped when you give a AAA game a poor review or criticize it. I know developers can often get pretty pissed when their games get trashed, because they've spent a lot of time and personal energy on it.

I try not to be an asshole, but it's important for readers to be aware of issues and problems. And when it comes to writing features about potentially sore topics, I do my best to give folks an opportunity to respond or weigh-in so there's a balance.

BTJ: Are journalists ever influenced to write a story in a particular way because of outside pressure? If so, where does the pressure come from? How so?

RH: I'm sure they are at times. Pressure can come from anywhere...publishers, PR, editors, etc. Most folks do their best to ignore these outside pressures and write what needs to be written. When I can tell someone is trying to influence how I cover a game or write a feature, I try to be polite while being firm. I'm not going to be an asshole about it, but I'm also not going to let them have a say in what I write. I suppose it helps that I came from a straight journalism background, and ethics was an important topic that I spent a lot of time on during J-school. I've had PR and industry folks ask to see a copy of my review or article before it goes to press. My reply is always: absolutely not. Usually they get it, when I explain why, but sometimes they don't. Either way, it doesn't happen too often.

BTJ: If you do change a story, what are the limits you place on what you are willing to change?

RH: If there's a factual error, then I will change it to correct any mistakes or wrong info. That's not very common. Also, I will give subjects of an article an opportunity to comment or have their voice heard in a piece when appropriate. But I don't let them take over.

That's about it. Unless I find out during the course of writing the story that facts are not what they seem or the story itself has changed, then I don't really tweak anything.

BTJ: Do game company PR workers influence editors or news organizations? If so, how much and how do they do it?

RH: I'm sure they try to. It's their job to procure the best possible coverage of the products and people they represent, so of course they'll do what they can to make that happen. Most understand there's a line that shouldn't be crossed, but I'm sure there are PR folks out there that push the envelope farther than it should be.

As to how much and how they might influence editors and publications, it's hard to say. A lot of the folks in editorial positions in this industry are good folks that have a lot of experience. I doubt a lot of them bow to PR pressure. If anything, they probably have to make some tough decisions based on what comes down from management in some cases. It's a hard question to really answer, since I'm not directly connected to a specific publication and I don't work on-site.

BTJ: Is video game journalism the same thing as news journalism? Should it be held to the same standards?

RH: I think game journalism is very different. At the end of the day, we're writing about entertainment. That is still very important to many people, and what gets written does have a

very real impact (positive and negative) on the lives of people who work in the industry. However, it's certainly not as important as world events and more serious topics that get covered elsewhere.

I think in some ways it should be held to similar standards, but not necessarily in other ways. It think it's always important to strive towards professionalism and following the core tenets of journalism. Yet there are some areas where the rules are a little looser in this industry. I don't think that's a bad thing necessarily, because we are writing about games and entertainment. A large number of game journalisms are critics and reviewers, though that's not to say we're not also feature writers and reporters. When you look at features and news stories, I think the core journalism tenets should be applied and adhered to more strictly. That doesn't always happen in the game journalism world, which I think isn't a good thing. But in terms of columns, reviews, previews, and product-focused, opinion and experience based writing, it's not as crucial.

BTJ: What are your feelings on the status of game journalism today?

RH: Game journalism is still relatively young as a career field, and it's still maturing and changing. I think it's a very awesome and exciting gig that can be very satisfying. There's a ton of writers and editors out there that do an amazing job covering the world of games in an exciting and professional manner. There's also a lot of people that take an immature, less-serious approach to how they conduct themselves and how they approach their writing. Bad writing isn't uncommon in the smaller sites and publications (and even in some larger outlets), since so many gamers and non-writing folk want to get in to this industry simply to play games and get paid for it. There's a lot more to this job than that. You don't have to have a journalism degree to succeed in this field, but man it really helps – and it helps to improve the quality of what we do across the board.

I think the people that take a professional approach and take the time to hone and continue improving their writing will continue to push the field upward and onward. I think we need to see, and will see, more of that. We've come a long way in a relatively short period of time, but there's a lot further to go.

VITA

Ben Jenkins grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. After attending Episcopal High School, Ben went on to Louisiana State University where he studied public relations. He graduated in May 2003 with a Bachelor of Arts in mass communication with a minor in religious studies.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Ben began working on a communications team for a non-profit agency in New Orleans providing disaster relief for the city and those affected by the storm. Ben went on to work for a public relations firm where he helped with the America's Wetland campaign, a campaign focused to raise awareness for the quickly eroding wetlands of Louisiana. In 2008, he decided to move back to Baton Rouge to pursue his master's degree from Louisiana State University.

Upon graduation Ben hopes to move back to New Orleans to continue working in public relations and enjoying the wonderful city.