

A Review Of Game Journalism:  
A Report on Practices in the Video-Game  
Journalism and Review Industry

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## Executive Summary

This document aims to acquaint the reader with current ethical issues in the video games industry. It provides an overview of the concerns voiced in recent years, and the negative impact these events and actions have had on the video game industry.

Major elements of the video game press has engaged in multiple breaches of ethics over the years and have had scandals similar to other tech-related fields. As a multibillion-dollar industry, it is expected that the video game press adhere to a higher standard of ethics and critique. However, experience has shown that they have not, and currently do not, adhere to these standards.

The issues raised in this document contain examples of events such as the blacklisting of developers based on financial or ideological standpoints when media exposure is critical to financial success for their Intellectual Property (IP). The same trend applies to journalists who aggressively critique high-budget IP these individuals are shunned and sometimes fired when publishers feel that the criticism gives a bad impression of the IP in question. Publishers also exhibit a tendency to obsess over reviews and scores journalists dispense, to the point where there is an active attempt to force the gaming media to cover these games under the condition that the game will not be criticized and a favorable impression is guaranteed.

Recently, information has surfaced that suggests that competing publications in the games media have been colluding behind the scenes on issues from the general tone of their coverage to unlawful firing and blacklisting of employees deemed as “problem children.” The consequences of this collusion stretches from reviews—where the tone of coverage decides whether developers keep their jobs and earn their bonuses—to how various events in the industry are covered. Throughout, journalists display a strong tendency to follow what Electronic Arts COO Peter Moore terms, “standard, shoddy, website journalism recipe, born out of a desperate need to increase click-thru rates to support advertising revenue.”<sup>1</sup>

This document examines the majority of these concerns and concludes the issues raised require reasoned debate so that fair and ethical solutions can be implemented. To this end, it promotes discussion of these issues and addressing the concerns at hand, so that the result is a better industry for everyone concerned.

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<sup>1</sup>Handrahan, M. (2013, March 5). Dead Space 4 cancelled as series sales decline - report. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2013-03-05-dead-space-4-cancelled-as-series-sales-decline-report\#comment-62914>

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to present, in detail, breaches in journalistic ethical practices in the video games press.

A long line of controversies and scandals have tarred the reputation of video game journalism dating back many years and continuing into the present. Game enthusiasts have become increasingly concerned about unethical practices within the industry, and recent high-profile revelations have caused them to reevaluate their trust in video game journalism. An equally important issue raised is the consequences of unethical practices for people involved in the industry.

This report will discuss the general state of the video game industry at varying levels before examining a number of scandals where instances of unethical conduct occurred.

# 1 Ethics in Journalism

The press, in whatever capacity or situation they operate, must show an ultimate loyalty to readers. Journalists should strive to put the public interest, and the truth, above all else. Ethical journalism is dedication to acting responsibly in the best interests of the reader.

In the same manner that journalism shapes public debate at national and local levels, journalism within a hobby or market will select topics of conversation, voice opinions, and direct attention to internal and external issues affecting the hobby. With that in mind, the role of journalistic ethics in video game media is no less important in conveying the truth to readers than in other fields. As an independent press benefits a nation, a “niche” independent press benefits a hobby. As corrupt journalism would harm a nation, it would harm an industry such as video games.

This document will evaluate possible breaches of journalistic ethics in the video game media. A commonly held metric of ethical journalism is found in these guidelines as summarized by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their book *The Elements of Journalism*:

- Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.<sup>2</sup>

These guidelines are fundamental to quality journalism, regardless of the scale or topic, and are echoed in the code of ethics which the Society of Professional Journalists espouses. Changes in journalism caused by the internet do not diminish their importance. There are certainly gray areas left to discretion, and no one is perfect. However, the public good requires journalists to abide by these guidelines as best as they can.

Reporting accurately and from a neutral standpoint is a cornerstone of ethical journalism. Inflating events for impact, espousing a one-sided narrative, stereotyping, or being disproportionately negative only serves to make the press

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<sup>2</sup>The elements of journalism - American Press Institute. (2014). Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/elements-journalism/>

less reliable in the eyes of the reader. The most thorough stories take the time to investigate and take into account varied backgrounds and perspectives.

The role of the public in this equation is to hold journalists accountable for their reporting, be it through economic or legal means or simply via open discussion. Relying on the standards outlined above, this document seeks to hold accountable those in video game journalism who may have not acted in the best interests of the industry they report on, and the readers they service.

## 2 The Video Game Industry and the Video Game Press

### 2.1 Video Games: A Multibillion-Dollar Industry

Video games are a highly lucrative industry with individual game franchises often bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars. Individual companies that create and support the industry can be worth billions of dollars.

According to a collection of studies by The Entertainment Software Association, in 2013 American consumers spent \$21.5<sup>3</sup> billion (USD) on video game software, hardware, and accessories<sup>4</sup>. Another report by the IDATE digital research and consultancy firm places the worldwide worth of the video game industry at €53.9 billion (\$68.2 billion). This is larger than the revenue of FIFA and the NFL combined.

Video games are a multibillion-dollar industry. Global industry revenue was forecast at \$6<sup>5</sup> billion in 2011<sup>6</sup> and \$78.5 billion in 2012<sup>7</sup>. The Entertainment Software Association, trade association for the industry in the United States, estimated that in 2009 American companies made \$ 10.5 billion in retail sales<sup>8</sup>, noting that the entertainment software industry exceeded 10% annual growth during a time when the nation's annual growth was below two percent<sup>9</sup>. In California alone, the video game industry employs more than 50,000 people and contributes more than \$2.2 billion to the state's economy<sup>10</sup>. The Japanese video game market, despite experiencing a decline in growth, was reported to be worth \$4.6 billion<sup>11</sup> in 2012, while gaming in South Korea was a \$9.16 billion industry in 2013<sup>12</sup>. The China Game Industry Report revealed its worth to be at \$9.7

<sup>3</sup>Society of Professional Journalists: Improving and protecting journalism since 1909. (2014, September 6). Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>4</sup>The Bottom Line. (2014, April 24). 2014 Essential Facts About The Computer And Video Game Industry, 13-13.

<sup>5</sup>France-Presse, A. (2013, December 9). New consoles, online gaming to drive double digit industry growth till 2017: Report. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/games/news/new-consoles-online-gaming-to-drive-double-digit-industry-growth-till-2017-report-456342>

<sup>6</sup>Baker, L. (2011, June 6). Factbox: A look at the \$65 billion video games industry. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/06/06/us-videogames-factbox-idUKTRE75552I20110606>

<sup>7</sup>Baker, L., & Nayak, M. (2012, June 12). Factbox: A look at the \$78 billion video games industry. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/01/us-videogameshow-e3-show-factbox-idUSBRE8501IN20120601>

<sup>8</sup>Siewek, S. (2010, August 10). Video Games in the 21st Century the 2010 Report, 3-3.

<sup>9</sup>The Entertainment Software Association. (2014). Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.theesa.com/facts/econdata.asp>

<sup>10</sup>Video Games in the 21st Century: The 2010 Report. (2010, August 10). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from [http://www.theesa.com/facts/state\\_reports\\_2010/California.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/state_reports_2010/California.pdf)

<sup>11</sup>Toto, S. (2013, April 8). Japan's Video Game Market Grows to \$4.6 Billion in 2012 (But Social Games Not Too Far Off). Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://www.gamesinasia.com/japan-video-game-market-over-4-billion-dollars-2012/>

<sup>12</sup>Do, A. (2013, October 28). South Korea's gaming market is worth

billion in 2012 and boldly projected it to grow to \$ 21.7 billion by 2017<sup>13</sup>.

Revenue comes from retail and online sales of game software as well as hardware sales of consoles, handhelds, and gaming PCs. In 2012, consoles were the core of the market, making up \$34.7 billion of global revenue. The fastest growing areas were online games (up 16.9% in market share from 2011) and mobile games (19%)<sup>14</sup>.

The video game industry's largest franchises regularly surpass Hollywood blockbusters in terms of revenue produced. In 2011, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* made \$650 million in its first month, almost double the revenue brought in by *Harry Potter* and *the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* over the entire year<sup>15</sup>. In August 2014, Marvel Studio's *Guardians of the Galaxy* made \$94 million on its opening weekend<sup>16</sup>. The following September Activision announced that their recent game, *Destiny*, had made \$325 million in its first five days<sup>17</sup>. As a result, Hollywood has taken interest in acquiring game franchises for adaptation to the big screen. The *Resident Evil* franchise has been highly successful, with five movies already in the series and a sixth in the making. The first five films have already grossed over \$915 million worldwide<sup>18</sup>.

Technologies that change the face of gaming are worth equally exorbitant amounts. Intel's PC division delivered \$9.2 billion to its overall revenue of \$14.6 billion in Q3 of 2014<sup>19</sup>. Oculus VR, creator of the virtual reality headset Oculus Rift, was purchased by Facebook for \$2 billion, with Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, stating that he believes the technology will be the "platform of tomorrow."<sup>20</sup> Twitch, an online streaming service for broadcasting real-time

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\$9.16 billion! Retrieved October 30, 2014, from <http://www.techinasia.com/south-koreas-gaming-market-worth-916-billion/>

<sup>13</sup>Ong, J. (2013, January 8). China's Video Game Industry Brought in \$9.7b in 2012. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://thenextweb.com/asia/2013/01/08/chinas-video-game-industry-brought-in-9-7-billion-in-2012-report/>

<sup>14</sup>Bond, P. (2008, June 18). Video game sales on winning streak, study projects. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/06/18/us-videogames-idUSN1840038320080618?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>

<sup>15</sup>Lehrman, R. (2012, March 18). Video game nation: Why so many play. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2012/0318/Video-game-nation-Why-so-many-play>

<sup>16</sup>Mendelson, S. (2014, August 3). Box Office: 'Guardians Of The Galaxy' Zooms To \$94M Weekend. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2014/08/03/box-office-guardians-of-the-galaxy-zooms-to-94m-weekend/>

<sup>17</sup>Activision Clarifies 'Destiny' Sales Numbers, Promises Game Will Evolve On PlayStation And Xbox. (2014, September 17). Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://www.inquisitr.com/1480863/activision-clarifies-destiny-sales-numbers-promises-game-will-evolve-on-playstation-and-xbox/>

<sup>18</sup>Resident Evil. (2014, November 2). Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=residentevil.htm>

<sup>19</sup>France-Presse, A. (2014, October 15). Intel Posts Record \$14.6 Billion Revenue; 12 Percent Jump in Q3 Profit. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/laptops/news/intel-posts-record-146-billion-revenue-12-percent-jump-in-q3-profit-607072>

<sup>20</sup>Kiss, J. (2014, March 25). Oculus: Facebook buys virtual reality gaming firm for \$2bn. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/25/facebook-buys-virtual-reality-gaming-firm-oculus>

gameplay footage, was acquired by Amazon for \$970 million<sup>21</sup>.

Given the scope of the industry as outlined, demands for ethics in video game journalism are well warranted.

## 2.2 The Worth of a Review

Online video game and technology review sites play an important part in the landscape of the video game industry. Scoring systems may differ from site to site, but they form an invaluable source of information to many consumers and may influence their decision to purchase a game. However, the ability to influence a consumer causes concern—particularly in matters of trust between the games press and their readers.

In the United States, 59% of the population plays video games. The average household has at least two people who play games and owns at least one game console, PC, or smartphone. In a survey of gamers, 48% said that either the quality of game graphics, an interesting storyline, a sequel to a favorite game, or word of mouth was the most important factor<sup>4</sup>.

IGN, an entertainment review site established in 1996, is one of the most well-known game coverage websites. They are seen as one of the top providers of information relating to video games and have been identified as a valuable media asset. IGN's Google+ page is followed by almost 4 million people<sup>22</sup> while their Facebook page has been Liked over 2.5 million times<sup>23</sup>. In 2005, IGN was bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. for \$650 million<sup>24</sup>.

Many review sites regularly accumulate millions of views and high praise by visitors. In July 2014, Giant Bomb, a site that includes personality-driven videos and commentary, had an estimated 6.4 million visits over the month<sup>25</sup>. The site itself was voted in TIME as one of the Top 50 Best Websites in 2011<sup>26</sup>. The Escapist, an online games magazine, was also voted as one of TIME's Top 50 Best Websites in 2011<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>Soper, T. (2014, September 25). Amazon completes acquisition of Twitch - GeekWire. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.geekwire.com/2014/amazon-completes-acquisition-twitch/>

<sup>22</sup>IGN - Google. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://plus.google.com/+IGN>

<sup>23</sup>IGN.com. (n.d.). Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://www.facebook.com/ign>

<sup>24</sup>News Corp. Acquires IGN for \$650 Million. (2005, September 10). Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2005-09-10/news-corp-dot-acquires-ign-for-650-million>

<sup>25</sup>Web traffic insights for Giantbomb.com. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://web.archive.org/web/20140811195039/http://www.similarweb.com/website/giantbomb.com>

<sup>26</sup>McCracken, H. (2011, August 16). I just discovered Giant Bomb on TIME's list of Best Websites. Explore it and more must-see sites on TIME.com. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from [http://web.archive.org/web/20110817105013/http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815\\_2087939\\_2087927,00.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20110817105013/http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815_2087939_2087927,00.html)

<sup>27</sup>McCracken, H. (2011, August 16). I just discovered The Escapist on TIME's list of Best Websites. Explore it and more must-see sites on TIME.com. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815\\_2087939\\_2087916,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815_2087939_2087916,00.html)



## The Influence of Reviews on Consumers

The ability of the media to inform and influence a consumer in their decision to purchase a product has been well documented. In 2008 Ad-ology Media Influence on Consumer Choice surveyed an online panel of 1105 adults. The survey reported that 54% of video game or console purchasers were influenced in their decision to buy by online video. Approximately 38% said online product reviews significantly influenced their purchase (38% equates to approximately 69 million consumers in the United States alone). President and CEO of Ad-ology Research C. Lee Smith states, “Gamers want to see new releases in action before they buy, and online video is an effective way to show actual gameplay.”<sup>28</sup>

In 2010, Electronic Entertainment Design and Research (EEDAR) and The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University studied the influence of video game reviews on people. Mock reviews were created of popular game *Plants vs Zombies* and used to gauge their influence on players. 188 students were divided into three groups: a control group given no review scores before playing, another given high review scores prior, and a third given low review scores prior. The findings revealed that those shown higher scores prior to playing were more likely to give higher scores themselves (a mean of 85 compared to the 90 they were shown). Their scores were 20% higher than those shown low reviews prior to playing (71 mean compared to the 61 they were shown). The control group gave mean scores of 79, close to what those the higher review score gave and not far from the original Metacritic score of 88.

After playing the game, participants were offered to pick between either \$10 in cash or a copy of the game. Those that were shown higher reviews were twice as likely to take the game than the cash. They were also 40% more likely to recommend the game to their friends than those in the lower review score group. EEDAR’s Jesse Divinch states,

We knew that review scores influenced consumers, but to what degree we couldn’t measure. Still, as people, if you ask yourself individually we say, ‘No, we are not persuaded by outside sources. We make our own opinions.’ But obviously, the review scores influenced them.

Divinch also warned that publisher bribery for good reviews could lead the industry to become one where consumers no longer trust or believe in critics. Ultimately, the study suggests that reviews are able to influence both consumers and the marketplace, even when consumers may not completely believe the reviews given to them<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>New Survey: Online Video, TV, and Magazines Influence Video Game Purchases.. (n.d.) The Free Library.(2014). Retrieved Nov 4 2014, from <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/New+Survey\%3a+Online+Video\%2c+TV\%2c+and+Magazines+Influence+Video+Game...-a0189670696>

<sup>29</sup>Snider, M. (2010, July 8). Survey says video game review scores affect consumer behaviors. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/gamehunters/post/2010/07/survey-says-video-game-review-scores-important/1?csp=34\#.VEh0KvnF-So>

## Metacritic and its Influence on the Industry

Metacritic is a website that aggregates reviews from around the web and creates an average numerical score. The site provides a color-coded system on top of its scores in order to summarize recommendations from critics. The website is highly influential, particularly in the video game industry. It has less influence in other entertainment sectors due to more popular alternatives existing (such as Rotten Tomatoes).

According to Metacritic, their “Metascores” are created through a weighted average, where some sites and critics are given more importance over others based off their quality and stature. The scoring system is subject to far stricter guidelines than in any other industry, however. While movies, television, and music are awarded with “universal acclaim” with a score between 81-100, games only obtain this level of rating at 90-100<sup>30</sup>. Full Sail University performed a study to discern the weightings given to individual publications, but Metacritic rejected the results as false<sup>31</sup>. The weighting given to each review is still unknown, but Metacritic states that they impact far less on the final score than is thought.

However, the aggregated scores themselves have considerable weight in the industry. Developers often have monetary incentives for reaching a target score. In March 2012, it was reported that Obsidian (under contract to Bethesda) missed out on their developer bonus due to a Metascore of 84—one point short from the product royalties they would have otherwise been paid. The news came one day after a round of layoffs within the company which were reported to be the result of a cancelled project<sup>32</sup>. Obsidian did not comment on if the layoffs were a direct result of the Metascore; however, it is thought that without the bonus they were unable to continue paying their staff<sup>33</sup>.

A 2013 Penny Arcade study on layoffs in the video game industry plotted studio Metacritic scores against how many employees in a team were fired during layoffs. They discovered that console-focused developers who scored above 80 on Metacritic did not encounter any layoffs (however, MMO-makers did experience layoff even with 80+ scores). The report commented on a “Metacritic 85 or bust” mentality amongst publishers, referring to the push for many publishers to reach a certain target in order to be deemed successful. A loose pattern was also discovered where development teams with lower-rated games lay off more people compared to teams that rate higher<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup>How We Create the Metascore Magic. (n.d.). Retrieved October 29, 2014, from <http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores>

<sup>31</sup>Matulef, J. (2013, March 27). Metacritic score-weighting process revealed - report. Retrieved October 31, 2014, from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-03-27-metacritic-score-weighting-process-revealed-report>

<sup>32</sup>Gilbert, B. (2012, March 15). Obsidian missed Fallout: New Vegas Metacritic bonus by one point. Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://www.joystiq.com/2012/03/15/obsidian-missed-fallout-new-vegas-metacritic-bonus-by-one-point/>

<sup>33</sup>Obsidian layoffs: Could blame lie with Metacritic? (2012, March 15). Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.shopto.net/news/29567/Obsidian-layoffs-Could-blame-lie-with-Metacritic>

<sup>34</sup>Teasdale, D. (2013, March 21). Is the games industry really dying? Twisted Pixel's lead

The “Metacritic 85 or bust” mentality also affects how people are hired by developers. A job listing in 2012 by developer Irrational Games had requirements that the applicant have “Credit on at least one game with an 85+ average Metacritic review score.”<sup>35</sup>

Kotaku interviewed Feargus Urquhart, CEO of Obsidian Entertainment, to share his experience on the effect that Metacritic has on the industry. Urquhart explained how demands from publishers can also get “unreasonable” when it comes to scores, expounding on what he terms “the 85+ mentality of publishers”:

...when we’re talking to publishers... there are conversations I’ve had in which the royalty that we could get was based upon getting a 95 . . . and I explained to them, I said, ‘Okay, there are six games in the past five years who have averaged a 95, and all of those have a budget of at least three times what you’re offering me.’ They were like, ‘Well, we just don’t think we should do it if you don’t hit a 95.’

Approaching the issue from a publisher’s perspective, an anonymous source told Kotaku that Metacritic scores were an “excuse publishers use in order to deprive developers of the bonuses they deserve.” However, another source stated that using the scores allowed publishers to “minimize risk” when funding a game<sup>36</sup>.

In an interview with Larian Studios’ Swen Vincke, Sean Ridgeley from Neoseeker asked about the influence Metacritic has on the industry. Ridgeley brought up a comment from public relations company The Rednar Group about how “sales teams live and die by Metacritic,” as well as the sentiment that PR and publishers do not see funding a game worthwhile if the game does not reach a Metascore of 90. Vincke replied:

I saw a curve once from a [big publisher] showing the correlation for an RPG between Metacritic score and sales. There’s an incredibly strong relationship, which is exponential. An 80 will get you a couple of hundred thousand sales, say, where a 90 will get you a couple million if it’s marketed properly.

That’s a very scary thing, that one number can have such a huge impact on whether or not a studio is going to be allowed to make its next game... Studios are killed over bad Metacritic scores. That happens every day almost.<sup>37</sup>

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designer dives deep into layoff data. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://archive.today/B7o90>

<sup>35</sup>Matulef, J. (2012, July 26). Irrational Games job ad lists 85 Metacritic score as a requirement. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-07-26-irrational-games-job-ad-lists-metacritic-score-as-a-requirement>

<sup>36</sup>Schrier, J. (2013, April 11). Metacritic Matters: How Review Scores Hurt Video Games. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/metacritic-matters-how-review-scores-hurt-video-games-472462218>

<sup>37</sup>Ridgeley, S. (2012, March 2). Larian Studios Interview Pt. 1: Games Journalism is Broken. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from [http://www.neoseeker.com/Articles/Games/Interviews/larian\\_studios\\_pt1/](http://www.neoseeker.com/Articles/Games/Interviews/larian_studios_pt1/)

Company stock prices are also affected by the Metascores of games and can play an important part in if a studio is kept open by a publisher. After Homefront received less-than-favorable scores in the 70s, THQ's stock prices fell \$1.25 bringing them down to \$4.69<sup>38</sup>. Kaos Studios, the development team behind Homefront, was closed not long afterwards<sup>39</sup>. Publisher Funcom also blamed Metacritic in an investor relations update after their own stock price halved following The Secret World receiving a score in the 70s<sup>40</sup>.

Considering what is at stake for both developers and publishers, reviewers can become conflicted when they give their final score for a game. At IGDA Toronto Rant and Rave Night 2014, reviewer Liana Kerzner made the following statement:

I stopped giving out 7.5's when I found out you needed an 8 to get your bonus. In that environment, giving a 7.5 is just a dick move. I cant do that to anybody. Even if the game deserves a 7.5, I'm gonna give it an 8.<sup>41</sup>

Kerzner would later claim that this statement was a joke<sup>42</sup>. Whether or not she was serious, Kerzner's statement exemplifies the lengths that reviewers may go to in order to protect developers from being laid off. Low scores may result in the loss of jobs or the closing of entire studios. Developers have attempted to mislead consumers as well in order to protect their studios.

In 2011, it was revealed that two BioWare employees had posted perfect user reviews on Metacritic for their game, *Dragon Age 2*. The scandal resulted in a consumer backlash with people posting punishingly negative reviews in response in order to deliberately bring the overall User Score down<sup>43</sup>. In a similar vein, two developers at Telltale Games were also caught trying to fix its user scores with perfect reviews for their game adaptation of Jurassic Park. When consumers found out about this tampering, they too posted overly-negative

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<sup>38</sup>Peckham, M. (2011, March 16). Homefront Reviews Torpedo THQ Stock Price, Metacritic Broken. Retrieved October 29, 2014, from <http://news.yahoo.com/homefront-reviews-torpedo-thq-stock-price-metacritic-broken-20110316-084500-427.html>

<sup>39</sup>Alexander, L. (n.d.). Homefront Reviews Torpedo THQ Stock Price, Metacritic Broken. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2013-03-05-dead-space-4-cancelled-as-series-sales-decline-report#comment-62914>

<sup>40</sup>Carter, G. (2012, August 12). Funcom Blames MetaCritic For Share Price Drop. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/119015-Funcom-Blames-MetaCritic-For-Share-Price-Drop>

<sup>41</sup>LIANA K ADMITS TO CHANGING REVIEW SCORES BECAUSE OF METACRITIC. (2014, October 7). Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://theralphretort.com/liana-k-admits-changing-review-scores-metacritic/>

<sup>42</sup>Kerzner, L. (n.d.). My response to the recent Ralph Retort challenge to my ethics. Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://redlianak.tumblr.com/post/99602108875/my-response-to-the-recent-ralph-retort-challenge-to-my>

<sup>43</sup>Chalk, A. (2011, March 15). Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/108482-BioWare-Employee-Busted-in-Dragon-Age-2-Review-Scandal-UPDATED>

reviews in retaliation<sup>44</sup>.

Scores being used as a punishment for the disagreeable actions of developers or publishers or the contents of their games is not uncommon. Both *Dragon Age 2* and *Jurassic Park* were both a result of consumers taking issue with the actions of developers. Journalists may also use scores as a way of punishing developers for things they do not agree with. In October 2014, Polygon ran a review of Platinum Games' *Bayonetta 2*. While the game scored an aggregate review of 91 on Metacritic (with many individual sites giving perfect or near-perfect scores), Polygon awarded it 7.5/10. This lower score was given based off the reviewer taking issue with the “blatant over-sexualization” of the protagonist in the game<sup>45</sup>. It should be noted that Polygon has identified itself as a “progressive” outlet and would potentially be embracing these kinds of critical reviews as standard fare—however, this clarification was not provided until a few days after its *Bayonetta 2* review<sup>46</sup>.

Giuseppe Nelva of DualShockers criticized the *Bayonetta 2* review soon after it was published. He commented on the state of modern game reviews and how they are now being used to push agendas:

The problem is deeper and is starting to take deep roots in modern reviews. Authors are departing from the idea of giving their readers a fair assessment of a game's quality, and are increasingly using reviews as their personal soapbox, or as a high horse on which to sit to educate the allegedly unschooled gaming masses on whatever personal agenda they happen to support, and to ‘punish’ those game developer that happen to produce games that don't fit said agendas.

Nelva goes on to say that while fully objective reviews are hard to achieve, “fair” reviews are something that should be strived for and expected. He also states that the purpose of a review is to inform readers on the quality of a game, and not school them on what they are allowed to like or not like<sup>47</sup>.

Reviews play an important role in the video game industry. Not only do reviews figure into how many units a game may end up selling, they may also decide the fates of those in the industry. Due to the emphasis publishers often place on the final aggregate score, developer livelihoods and jobs are frequently tied into the critical reception of a game. This encourages publishers to use

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<sup>44</sup>Crossley, R. (2011, November 18). Telltale devs caught abusing Metacritic user score. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.develop-online.net/news/telltale-devs-caught-abusing-metacritic-user-score/0110582>

<sup>45</sup>Geis, A. (2014, October 14). *Bayonetta 2* review: Heaven and hell. Retrieved October 29, 2014, from <http://www.polygon.com/2014/10/13/6957677/bayonetta-2-review-wii-u>

<sup>46</sup>Grant, C. (2014, October 17). On GamerGate: A letter from the editor. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.polygon.com/2014/10/17/6996601/on-gamergate-a-letter-from-the-editor>

<sup>47</sup>Nelva, G. (2014, October 14). *Bayonetta 2s* “Over-Sexualization” Complaint: A Perfect Example of What's Wrong with Modern Reviews || DualShockers. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://www.dualshockers.com/2014/10/14/bayonetta-2s-over-sexualization-complaint-a-perfect-example-of-whats-wrong-with-modern-reviews/>

scores to their advantage when funding developers, as well as place undue pressure on reviewers to give a high score—an act which not only maximizes profits, but also secures high share prices for stockholders. This is a major contributor to the unethical practices found in the video game press and explains why developers, publishers, and journalists often overstep their boundaries in their relationships with one another.

The negative effects of these relationships for the consumer include biased, uninformative reviews and a proliferation of low quality or untimely reviews from sites. For sites that defy publishers, they may end up being threatened with advertisers pulling out, or being blacklisted from receiving review copies. While sites that take advantage of publisher offers may benefit in the short-term, these practices have contributed to a growing distrust between the consumer and the press. Evidence of these practices surfaces on a regular basis, coloring consumer perception of the video game press negatively.

### 2.3 Ethical Concerns in the Relationships between Publishers and Reviewers

Over the years, relationships between publishers and media have been well-documented. These relationships can vary in scope and severity, with some of the more severe instances including questionable gift giving, coverage being bought by publishers, and blacklisting publications from receiving review copies. Journalists have sometimes resigned or lost their jobs as a result of these scandals.

#### “Content for Sale” and Publisher Reactions to Low Scores

One high-profile scandal came to light when former editorial director of GameSpot Jeff Gerstmann’s non-disclosure agreement expired and he was finally able to speak about his dismissal from the website. Despite being dismissed in 2007, it was not until 2012 when Gerstmann would explain his side of the story. Gerstmann said a new management team had been brought in that was inexperienced in dealing with an editorial group. At the time, Eidos Interactive had been advertising their new release Kane and Lynch on the website. After a poor review score was given to the game, Eidos threatened to pull advertising revenue from GameSpot. Despite pressure from advertisers being common, the management team panicked, deciding that Gerstmann was unreliable. They dismissed him as a result.

Gerstmann stated,

They felt they couldn’t trust me in the role. We did what an editorial team does. We did what we were supposed to be doing. We reviewed games, we instructed people about the quality of games, and we were completely honest. This management team buckled when faced with having a lot of ad dollars walk out the door.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Cavalli, E. (2012, March 15). Jeff Gerstmann Explains His Departure From Gamespot. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/116360-Jeff-Gerstmann-Explains-His-Departure-From-Gamespot>

Earlier in 2005, Dan Hsu, writing for *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, published an editorial discussing his experiences with “content for sale”. In the article, Hsu decried how the practice of covering games in exchange for buying ad space was so widespread that many publishers assumed that his magazine was the same. He alleged that many publishers would try to influence reviews or demand to see stories before they went to print. Hsu claimed that the bold nature of these publishers came from other publications giving them leeway.

In his editorial, Hsu explained how he contacted a public relations representative from a large publisher:

‘Yes,’ he confirmed. ‘We can pretty much get whatever cover we want from that magazine. All it takes is for us to meet with the publisher, promise that we’ll buy some ads, and discuss the details from there.’ So...that magazine’s cover stories are for sale. Great.

In a roundtable interview for *E-mpire* conducted by editor-in-chief David Gornoski, Hsu was also joined by Kyle Orland, who worked for *VGMWatch.com* at the time (he is now editor-in-chief at *ArsTechnica*). In the interview, Hsu indicated he knew of more than one publication and game publisher that was engaging in this practice, yet would not disclose their names as it would be, in his words, “petty.” However, Hsu’s editorial mentioned three separate publications—two magazines and one website—that he believed to be engaging in this practice. He also mentioned how he heard from another publisher about an act referred to as “Editorial Marketing,” where coverage would be gained through other means, such as purchasing ad space<sup>49</sup>.

In a follow-up piece on the interview, Orland asked how changes in the industry will come about. He points to a statement from Hsu for the answer:

‘The consumers have to rise up and demand better from the press,’ Hsu says. ‘I’m not sure how they can do this if they themselves are not sure who’s doing the right things, and who’s not... but I hope the industry watchdogs . . . can help us clean things up, so we’re all get the proper respect that we deserve, as an industry as a whole.’<sup>50</sup>

After the release of *Duke Nukem Forever* in 2011, a public relations firm working for 2K Games named The Redner Group sent out an open threat on their Twitter account. The tweet stated those that had given *Duke Nukem* a poor score may be blacklisted and not receive review copies of new games in the future.

Ben Kuchera, writing for *ArsTechnica* at the time, wrote about the threat, explaining that the game got low scores initially during a preview event. However, he still found the final scores “shocking” considering the game’s budget

<sup>49</sup>Gornoski, D. (2005, December 21). Game media leaders discuss allegations of content for sale and other controversies. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from [http://web.archive.org/web/20070516012240/http://nintendonow.e-mpire.com/index.php?categoryid=5&\\\_articles\\\_articleid=3317](http://web.archive.org/web/20070516012240/http://nintendonow.e-mpire.com/index.php?categoryid=5&\_articles\_articleid=3317)

<sup>50</sup>The Game Beat Pressing the button-pressing press’ buttons. (2005, December 16). Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://kyleorland.com/thegamebeat/?m=20051216>



Figure 1: Tweet from TheRednerGroup on who receives review copies.

and brand recognition. Kuchera also discussed how common blacklisting was in the industry, but how rare it was to be seen in public:

What’s shocking about that tweet isn’t that some outlets may get blacklisted—that’s something you risk every time you give a game a low score, but that the Redner Group would release a public statement letting outlets know they are on notice if they went ‘too far’ in their review. This sends a chilling message to those who review games professionally: hold your tongue if you feel strongly about a game, or you may not have timely coverage of a future release.

2K Games eventually dismissed the group with an apology<sup>51</sup>.

Low scores on websites may have many effects on the industry, from advertisements being pulled to publications being blacklisted for review copies. Publishers are uncomfortable advertising a game on a site which scored it poorly, believing it leads to a drop in revenue. When combined with Dan Hsu’s explanation of “content for sale,” a picture begins to emerge of an industry that needs to start addressing the issue of where marketing begins and advertising ends. Without a line separating the two, a review outlet can slip into becoming an extension of the publisher’s marketing department instead of an independent voice of critique.

### Early Review Exclusivity Deals and Shopping Around for Favorable Reviews

Publishers will sometimes offer media outlets exclusive first reviews with the understanding that a game will be given a positive score.

<sup>51</sup>Kuchera, B. (2011, June 15). Duke Nukem’s PR threatens to punish sites that run negative reviews. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/06/duke-nukems-pr-threatens-to-punish-sites-that-run-negative-reviews/>



One fairly publicized example in 2007 involved 2K Games and their attempt to strike a deal with review site IGN in order to secure a positive score for their game *Prey*. 2K Games had placed an embargo over *Prey* to prevent outlets releasing reviews early. At the same time, however, they were also attempting to strike deals with selected outlets by allowing them to release their review ahead of competitors on the basis they would give it a high score. A former IGN editor, who wished to remain anonymous, said they heard their editor-in-chief at the time Doug Perry speaking with 2K Games' PR manager Marci Ditter about obtaining a review exclusivity deal.

The anonymous editor recalled Tom McNamara being in charge of the review of *Prey*, but understood that he had not yet played the game due to an earlier conversation that day. He would then recall overhearing Perry and Ditter talking about the game and its review:

I hear Doug saying to Marci something along the lines of 'No, I'm sure it is a great game. I'm pretty sure it is going to do well. That's why we want the exclusive. We don't want the exclusive on crappy games...' so on... He gets off the phone and heads over to Tom and asks him, 'Tom, what were you thinking you were going to give *Prey*?' That's sort of a no-no to begin with, but Tom says, 'I haven't even played it. I have no idea.' Doug persists, 'No, but if you were gonna guess... like 9 or higher, right? Nothing lower than an 8, obviously?' (These are pretty much direct quotes.) That's when I say, 'Doug, you can't ask him that crap.' Doug replies, 'Well, we can talk about ranges of scores. That's okay.' He then proceeds to ask Tom for a score range. Once again, Tom replies that he has no idea. I scolded Doug again and he went back to his desk where he calls Marci Ditter and says that he's sure it will do 9 or higher. Apparently, 2K Games had shopped the score around to 1up.com previously. After they refused, Marci Ditter had attempted to sell IGN 360 on the exclusive as well by asking for a 9. After I made a big fuss about it, Doug decided not to take the exclusive either.<sup>52</sup>

While Perry did not take the offer, the news about it had already damaged the review's integrity. He pressured the reviewer to score the game before playing it. Even though the game was eventually awarded a nine out of ten, there is no certainty that the review was not affected. The review was still tainted with possible bias due to Perry's pressuring.

Another incident occurred in 2007 between EGM, 1UP, and publisher Ubisoft over early review releases for the game *Assassin's Creed*. A few days before Ubisoft's review embargo for the game ended, 1UP noticed that several outlets were already releasing their reviews. This was not just an exclusivity deal. 1UP sent an inquiry to Ubisoft about it and learned that, if a review score was high

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<sup>52</sup>Gornoski, D. (2007, April 21). Video Game Media Watch – The Video Game Journalism Review Blog. Formerly the Video Game Ombudsman. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://web.archive.org/web/20110816135411/http://vgmwatch.com/archives/1111>

enough, they were allowing outlets to release their reviews early. As 1UP's score was only a 7.0, they were required to abide by Ubisoft's original embargo date. The three reviews that had been allowed to break the embargo had given the game perfect scores.

In an attempt to address why they were one of the last sites to release an Assassin's Creed review, Dan Hsu at 1UP prepared a news story for publication. He and others at the site wished to explain to readers why this selective release of reviews existed. Ubisoft interpreted this as non-cooperative and blacklisted both 1UP and EGM (another of Hsu's employers) from receiving future review copies. Even after this blacklisting, Ziff Davis Media, 1UP and EGM's parent company, refused to allow the story to be published to avoid attracting more ire from Ubisoft—who was also a major advertiser for them. Hsu stated that this was one of the reasons why he eventually resigned from both publications<sup>53</sup>.

In another similar event in 2014, Warner Bros offered YouTube reviewers early review copies of the game *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* through PR firm Plaid Social. Those who accepted would be paid to promote the game on the condition that they would only do so in a positive light. A copy of the contract stipulated that reviewers were to follow a number of conditions, including not showing any game glitches, persuading watchers to buy the game, and discuss the game's "nemesis system" at length. The reviewer was also informed that they must submit their video for approval by the company and adhere to changes if necessary.

Erik Kain, writing for Forbes, voiced his dismay at the paid branding deal and pointed out the ethical problems they can create for all those that review games:

The fact is, if we're going to be upset over journalistic ethics we need to take a broad view of what a video game journalist actually is. If we're concerned that writers at video game publications are too close to the developers they cover—both indie and AAA—then we need to be equally concerned about influential YouTube and Twitch stars with dubious ties to these same creators, especially when there are deals being made that essentially silence critical voices while paying prominent figures to promote content.

Ultimately, Kain raised concerns that deals such as these will hurt the game's image as well as its developers and publishers. They also "discredit Youtubers and insult consumers," he states, creating a no-win situation for anyone involved<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup>Hsu, D., & Boyer, C. (2008, August 26). Behind the Scenes: Gaming Journalism (Part 3). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from <http://sorethumbs.tumblr.com/post/47555759/gamingjournalism3>

<sup>54</sup>Kain, E. (2014, October 8). 'Middle-Earth: Shadow Of Mordor' Paid Branding Deals Should Have #GamerGate Up In Arms. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/10/08/middle-earth-shadow-of-mordor-paid-branding-deals-should-have-gamergate-up-in-arms/>

## Reviews, Events and Gifts

At a preview event in Paris for the game Watch Dogs, some journalists reportedly received an Asus Nexus 7 tablet as part of the event's "asset kit." These tablets were not needed to preview the game. The giveaway was first mentioned by Official Nintendo Magazine UK editor-in-chief Steve Hogarty on Twitter:

It is TRUTH. Ubisoft gave journalists a free Nexus 7 each at an exclusive Watchdogs preview event in Paris. Oh Ubisoft.

- @misterbrilliant - 8:14 PM - 15 Apr 2014

Since then, the event has been backed by other prominent reporters, some of which stated that they would not accept the tablet or were giving it away in the name of charity. In response to Hogarty's tweet, Gamesindustry's Dan Pearson said,

@misterbrilliant Ours is going to GamesAid for Ebay auctioning, but yeah, pretty shameless.

- @Danbojones - 8:20 PM - 15 Apr 2014

Official Xbox Magazine UK's Jon Hicks also tweeted on the subject with the following:

For the record: Ubi gave @dirigiblebill a Nexus 7 as a Watch Dogs "asset kit". We made clear we can't accept it & agreed to give it away.

- @MrJonty - 8:30 PM - 15 Apr 2014

Additionally, VideoGamer's Steve Burns was offered the tablet, but refused to accept it:

For the record: I was offered the Nexus, gave it back to the PR. No reason to take it. I did drink the water that was also in the bag though

- @TheSteveBurnio - 8:21 PM - 15 Apr 2014

Not all journalists present at the event were offered the tablet. As reported by LCI's Guillaume Delalande and a number of French journalists, many only received a T-shirt. How many decided to accept the tablet and failed to disclose it is unknown<sup>55</sup>.

These instances are becoming increasingly common in the video games industry. Tae Kim, a writer for GamePro before its closure, detailed his experience when attending one such review event for Call of Duty: Black Ops. Flown by

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<sup>55</sup>Nelva, G. (2014, April 15). Did Ubisoft Give Journalists a Free Nexus 7 Tablet at a Watch\_Dogs Preview Event? (UPDATED) || DualShockers. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from [http://www.dualshockers.com/2014/04/15/ubisoft-gives-journalists-free-nexus-7-tablet-at-watch\\\_dogs-event/](http://www.dualshockers.com/2014/04/15/ubisoft-gives-journalists-free-nexus-7-tablet-at-watch\_dogs-event/)

both airplane and helicopter, Kim was booked into the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa by Activision where he and others would review the game for the following three days. He states that during the event, all travel, accommodation, and food was paid for by Activision. At the trip's conclusion, he was also given two items to keep—a branded flight helmet from the helicopter ride to the event, and the Mad Catz headset he used to test the game<sup>56</sup>.

Michael McWhertor, a writer for Kotaku, also wrote about his experience in 2009 when attending a review event for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. Booked into a Santa Barbara resort, he spent his two days there playing the game for evaluation. However, he also touched on the issues of review events and why they are held. Some reasons include security, or the ability to pick whom to invite, or controlling the environment the game is played in by making sure the equipment used is reliable and of a high standard<sup>57</sup>.

Ben Kuchera, writing for Ars Technica at the time, offered a very different perspective:

And let's be very clear: these events are designed to wow and impress the reviewer. It's not a matter of fighting piracy, because the game had already been leaked. It's not a matter of just controlling the setting, because that can be done without putting a reviewer up in a country club for three night. Publishers like Activision spend the money in order to squeeze out the best reviews possible, and to send an implicit message: take care of us, and we'll continue to take care of you.

Kuchera also stressed that at these events there is a tough choice between staying in line with an ethics policy or accepting gifts and helping a writer's site traffic<sup>56</sup>.

In early 2007, Richie Young, a former editor for Official PlayStation 2 Magazine, commented on the state of Australian game journalism. Despite stating that the Australian industry was not nearly as corrupt as people thought, Young brought to light a "hit list" of things he knew that had happened:

1)Fact: games reviewers have been offered either sex or money to change a review score. To quote the PR person I am referring to: 'I will do ANYTHING if you can change the score. Just tell me what it will take'

...

3)Fact: PR companies identify journalists they want to impress... and go about in unashamedly. This includes campaigning them for better coverage by using elaborate gifts like dinners, overseas trips. . .

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<sup>56</sup>Kuchera, B. (2010, November 10). Call of Duty: Black Ops review event, press gifts detailed. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2010/11/call-of-duty-black-ops-review-event-press-gifts-detailed/>

<sup>57</sup>McWhertor, M. (2009, December 2). Reviewing A Game On Their Terms: The Increasingly Prominent "Review Event" Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/5416788/reviewing-a-game-on-their-terms-the-increasingly-prominent-review-event>

Young touched on another issue, stating that game reviewers are generally paid very little, adding to the reasons as to why they may be tempted to take bribes. He also stated that while it is not their fault, it is a “reality of the industry.”<sup>58</sup>

Consider at this point that development teams are not generally involved with these kinds of decisions. In larger companies especially, these decisions are usually made by a company’s PR department or even by an external PR firm. However, review events raise a number of concerns on what sorts of influence they have on those who attend. A particularly important point which needs addressing is whether or not giving free items to journalists encourages them to engage in unethical practices.

### The Games Media Awards 2012

On October 24th, 2012, writer Robert Florence posted an article titled *Lost Humanity 18: A Table of Doritos on Eurogamer*. In the article, Florence commented on the state of gaming journalism and his experiences with the 2012 Games Media Awards (GMA). A week prior to the article, an image of Geoff Keighley, a prominent games journalist, sitting in a chair surrounded by product placement began to spread around the internet.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 2: Geoff Keighley sitting next to product placement during an interview for LevelSave over Comic-Con, Halo 4, and Mountain Dew and Doritos’ “Double XP” campaign.

Florence wrote a scathing criticism on the image and what it stood for, but also labeled it as “the most important image in games journalism today.”

<sup>58</sup>Richie, D. (2007, March 28). The Word from The Inside - BigPond GameArena. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://archive.today/j8rSd>

<sup>59</sup>Griffith, A. (2012, October 18). Halo 4, Mtn Dew, Doritos; An Interview with Geoff Keighley - LevelSave. Retrieved November 12, 2014, from <http://levelsave.com/halo-4-mtn-dew-doritos-an-interview-with-geoff-keighley/>

Florence’s article further detailed another event that took place during the GMA: a competition where journalists could win a PlayStation 3. Journalists were asked to promote a game on their Twitter feed in order to win. An argument subsequently broke out between those who thought it was unethical and those who did not. Many winners chose to give their Playstation 3 away after the debate, though Florence believes it was already “too late.”<sup>60</sup>

One of the journalists Florence referred to in regards to the competition was Lauren Wainwright, who was previously quoted in the article for several tweets she made during the GMAs. This included two tweets relating to the Playstation 3 giveaway:

One games journalist, Lauren Wainwright, tweeted: ‘Urm... Trion were giving away PS3s to journalists at the GMAs. Not sure why that’s a bad thing?’

Now, a few tweets earlier, she also tweeted this: ‘Lara header, two TR pix in the gallery and a very subtle TR background. #obsessed @tombraider pic.twitter.com/VOWDSavZ’

And instantly I am suspicious. I am suspicious of this journalist’s apparent love for Tomb Raider. I am asking myself whether she’s in the pocket of the Tomb Raider PR team. I’m sure she isn’t, but the doubt is there. After all, she sees nothing wrong with journalists promoting a game to win a PS3, right?<sup>61</sup>

After the article was published, Wainwright filed a complaint against Eurogamer together with her employer Intent Media, the organizer of the GMAs. Eurogamer subsequently removed the sections from the article, though they did not admit any liability.

John Walker, a writer for Rock Paper Shotgun, was also mentioned in the censored parts of the article in which another journalist, Dave Cook, directed a comment at him. Cook’s tweet stated that the competition was not an advertisement, just a hashtag. He also told Walker to “get off the pedestal”—a comment that caused Florence some concern<sup>62</sup>.

Walker also commented on the removal of sections following Wainwright’s complaint:

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<sup>60</sup>Florence, R. (2012, October 24). Lost Humanity 18: A Table of Doritos. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-24-lost-humanity-18-a-table-of-doritos>

<sup>61</sup>Usher, W. (2012, October 25). Eurogamer Writer Loses Job For Pointing Out How Much Video Game Journalism Fails - CinemaBlend.com. Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.cinemablend.com/games/Eurogamer-Writer-Loses-Job-Pointing-Out-How-Much-Video-Game-Journalism-Fails-48600.html>

<sup>62</sup>Kain, E. (2012, October 10). Video Game Journalist Robert Florence Leaves Eurogamer After Libel Complaints. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/10/25/video-game-journalist-robert-florence-leaves-eurogamer-after-libel-complaints/>

When a journalist feels they have been misrepresented, even if this so-called misrepresentation has arisen from their having been directly quoted, the response should not be to demand it be removed. The response is to offer to write a response column, or to publish a response in any of the public outlets to which they have access. To do anything else is to be an enemy of journalism, deliberately stifling discussion, and going out of one’s way to ensure further discussion is feared.<sup>63</sup>

Erik Kain, writing for Forbes, later found evidence suggesting that Wainwright may have had an even deeper conflict of interest than Florence initially suspected. Tomb Raider, the game which Wainwright had promoted for the PlayStation 3 competition, was published by Square Enix—the same company that Wainwright had done freelance for before and listed on her resume. Kain also alleged that she had previously written about the game as well.

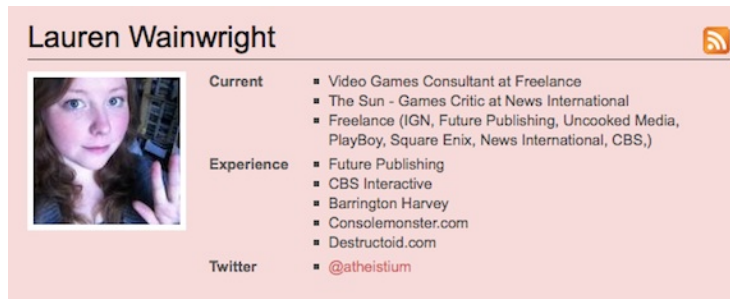


Figure 3: Lauren Wainwright’s work experience displayed on Journalisted at the time of Kain’s article.

Square Enix has since been removed from her employment section<sup>64</sup>.

Following the article and the controversy it generated, Florence left Eurogamer. The site later on confirmed that Wainwright had threatened legal action using what Kain described as the UK’s “absurd” libel laws. In his article detailing the event, Kain also discussed the state of video game journalism and its relationship with publishers:

More to the point, it’s a problem at the cultural or institutional level - or perhaps even at the genetic level, with bad practices passed on from one generation to the next until nobody’s quite sure what’s acceptable conduct any longer.

Trips paid by publishers, lavish gifts to reporters and critics, advertising dollars and a cozy working relationship between the press and

<sup>63</sup>Walker, J. (2012, October 25). John Walker’s Electronic House. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://botherer.org/2012/10/25/an-utter-disgrace/>

<sup>64</sup>Lauren Wainwright - journalisted.com. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://journalisted.com/lauren-wainwright>

the industry they cover – becoming even unwittingly compromised in this climate is an intoxicatingly easy thing to do.<sup>65</sup>

The events of the GMAs and the subsequent fallout reveal a host of issues many find troubling. There is a general perception that journalists are too close to the subjects and establishments they report on. Publications are also too quick to cave in to demands to censor stories that might reflect negatively on game journalism itself. At the same time there seems to be a lack of basic ethical practice in the rest of the game journalism industry, including little to no disclosure when it comes to connections between a reporter and their subject.

### Electronic Arts

Electronic Arts (EA) in particular has been known for several scandals involving their interactions with video game journalists and reviewers.

In 2009, as part of an on-going promotion for the game Dante’s Inferno, EA mailed out a number of decorated boxes to journalists. Christopher Grant, writing for Joystiq, detailed the contents of the boxes:

They’ve mailed this editor, and presumably the editors at several other media outlets, a check for \$200. The packaging says that ‘by cashing this check you succumb to avarice by hoarding filthy lucre but by not cashing it, you waste it, and thereby surrender to prodigality.’ If your SAT dictionary isn’t at arm’s length, that last one means wastefulness. So, we either cash it and ‘succumb to avarice’ or burn it and be wasteful. What’s an ethical gaming blog to do . . .

Joystiq donated their check to a non-profit organisation<sup>66</sup>. ArsTechnica also reported on the check, stating that some other outlets either burned it or donated it<sup>67</sup>. However, it is unknown how many checks were sent out and how many journalists may have accepted them.

During the release of *Battlefield 3* in Europe, NRK, a major Norwegian news outlet, broke the news that EA Norway seemed to be attempting to manipulate reviews. The few select publications who received early review copies first had to answer questions over whether their reviewer was critical or enthusiastic about the new game. EA Norway appeared to be screening for positive reviewers to decide which publications deserve early review copies in the future. This could

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<sup>65</sup>Kain, E. (2012, October 31). Eurogamer Confirms Journalist Lauren Wainwright Threatened Legal Action. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/10/31/eurogamer-confirms-journalist-lauren-wainwright-threatened-legal-action/>

<sup>66</sup>Grant, C. (2009, September 9). EA marketers send Joystiq a \$200 check and we save their souls. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.joystiq.com/2009/09/09/ea-marketers-send-joystiq-a-200-check-and-we-save-their-souls/>

<sup>67</sup>Kuchera, B. (2010, September 29). Scared to open the package: Adventures in game writer bribery. Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2010/09/scared-to-open-the-package-adventures-in-game-writer-bribery/1/>



also cause editors to deliberately select those who are the most positive about the game to review it. EA Norway quickly issued an apology after the NRK released the story<sup>68</sup>.

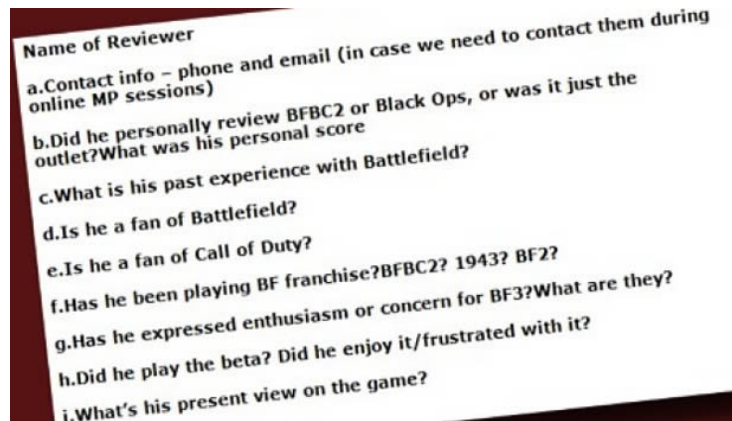


Figure 4: A questionnaire sent out by EA to early-access reviewers of Battlefield 3 in Norway.

In September 2013, a forum board for Melbourne-based developer FireMonkeys was hacked. The information of more than 40,000 users, including their names, e-mails, and home addresses, was compromised. It was not until September 2014 that a whistleblower came forward on Reddit with a post titled, “Of Corruption in the Australian Games Industry,” to share what had happened:

During my tenure at a large publisher, our community forum was hacked, and the information of over 40,000 members (including names, and email addresses) was downloaded and stolen. The publisher suppressed this information. When my contract had expired I approached a writer about this, and he declined to publish the story because he was close friends with people who work at this publisher and the publisher’s local office.<sup>69</sup>

This information was eventually taken to Kotaku for follow-up, where the forum and FireMonkeys’ publisher EA were named by the source:

Our source says that EA elected not to inform users, telling them the forum was being taken down for temporary maintenance. The forums were never restored and remain offline to this day. According to our source, employees at FireMonkeys worked diligently to restore

<sup>68</sup>Et forsøk på å manipulere mediene. (2011, October 18). Retrieved November 1, 2014, from [http://www.nrk.no/kultur/\\\_et-forsok-pa-a-manipulere-mediene-1.7838789](http://www.nrk.no/kultur/\_et-forsok-pa-a-manipulere-mediene-1.7838789)

<sup>69</sup>Of Corruption in the Australian Games Industry • /r/Games. (2014, September 9). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from [http://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/2fv3mg/of\\\_corruption\\\_in\\\_the\\\_australian\\\_games\\\_industry/](http://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/2fv3mg/of\_corruption\_in\_the\_australian\_games\_industry/)

the forums before being told by certain EA representatives to keep the site offline and not inform the community of the hack.

When asked for comment by EA, a representative confirmed that the hack had taken place, but they did not address the source's allegation that they had intentionally suppressed the information at the time<sup>70</sup>.

The video game industry faces multiple pressures in ensuring the success of its products. It depends heavily on the work of journalists and reviewers to promote its works and convince consumers to purchase them. This section has detailed various instances in which journalists and reviewers have been involved in ethically questionable practices including bribery for good reviews, censorship of negative coverage, threats to blacklist outlets from review copies, and even outright instances of blacklisting by publishers and their PR companies. Some of the journalists involved in these scandals have been fired, have been forced out of their jobs, or have resigned in protest to what they feel is corruption in the industry. Failure to fully address these issues leaves readers in doubt as to the veracity of the video games press.

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<sup>70</sup>Serrels, M. (2014, September 10). EA's Studio Firemonkeys Hacked Last Year, Didn't Immediately Inform Users. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.kotaku.com.au/2014/09/firemonkeys-hacked-last-year-didnt-immediately-inform-users/>

## 3 Independent Developers and the Video Game Press

### 3.1 Success or Failure on a Small Scale

For years publishers have released “budget titles” that were generally smaller in scope and price alongside larger and more expansive games in order to satiate the public’s demand for games. These games usually retailed for half of or even less than the price of blockbuster titles, yet could be profitable through word of mouth without large marketing pushes, and they required a far smaller team working on them. However, often these games still required that those making them establish connections with publishers and console makers to get their games to market.

With the advent of services like Steam, Xbox Live Arcade, and the Apple App Store, small developers were much less dependent on these connections and could create and release games on their own. Without pressure from publishers, small developers were free to make whatever types of games they wished, and often pushed the envelope in terms of storylines and gameplay. These “indie” titles are now a bona fide sub-market in the gaming sphere. Many players await these still lower-priced games as eagerly as the next installment of blockbuster franchises such as Madden or Call of Duty.

Many popular indie games attempt to use innovative concepts, rather than expensive next-level graphics and hard-to-obtain popular intellectual property, to attract their fans. This has resulted in many of the most popular games of the last few years being unavailable at retail outlets and unaccompanied by costly marketing campaigns.

It would be difficult to state conclusively how much the indie market is worth for multiple reasons. Chief among these is the fact that it has grown increasingly difficult to define an indie game. Games like Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* and *Journey* are made by smaller teams and do not include high-resolution graphics. However, their popularity has earned them a place on store shelves. This year, Ubisoft has released *Child of Light* and *Valiant Hearts*; both games are only available through download and are 2-D adventures with innovative themes. However, Ubisoft is a multi-national, billion-dollar corporation and cannot be considered “indie” by any stretch of the imagination.

When a smaller developer finds success the results can be staggering. For example, Mojang, the developer of *Minecraft*, was recently acquired by Microsoft for \$2.5 billion. A majority of the ownership belonged to just one person who had done almost all of the programming for the original game<sup>71</sup>. In another example, Undead Labs has so far sold 2 million copies of its zombie-themed survival game *State of Decay*. Many franchises can make a profit with 2 million in sales<sup>72</sup>. However, Undead Labs reached this mark with nearly no advertising

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<sup>71</sup>Hern, A., & Stuart, K. (2014, September 15). *Minecraft sold: Microsoft buys Mojang for \$2.5bn*. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/15/microsoft-buys-minecraft-creator-mojang-for-25bn>

<sup>72</sup>Campbell, E. (2014, October 2). *State of Decay Surpasses 2 Million Copies Sold*

at all. Many who bought the game learned of it through YouTube “Let’s Play” videos.

Success can be difficult to achieve though. Many of these independent projects fail to ever make it to market, leaving those who invested their own money in dire financial straits. In other cases a game may get released and sales are only enough to cover losses. For example, David Galindo’s *Cook Serve, Delicious*, struggled during its initial release. The iPad version of the game netted the developer only \$15,013 from January through October 2013<sup>73</sup>. Another example is *Starlicker* from Heartonomy, which was an almost completely self-funded operation. Only one person was paid upfront for the year and a half of development where there was no revenue. Everyone on the team lived off their savings or had second jobs. After its release the game made a total of \$300<sup>74</sup>.

One member of the team, Hayden Cacace, explained the situation to Indiegames.com:

For the entire duration of the project, when it came to paying rent and bills and buying food, we each had to fend for ourselves. Rudd and I were full time on the project, so for us that meant living entirely off our savings. For William, it meant periodically taking time off from freelance gigs to focus on *StarLicker* art in focused bursts. Kurt was wise enough to force me to pay him a little something upfront, but it was a pitifully small amount and definitely less than what his contribution was worth. Zane, having just graduated from college, was an unpaid intern working for IOU.

But then we released the game and money did not start rolling in. It barely even trickled in. And this created a very strange and unexpected set of feelings beyond the obvious disappointment and frustration. I felt really strongly that I just completely let everyone on the team down. It was like I assembled a team of some of my most talented friends whom I had the utmost respect for, only to have them waste a huge chunk of their creative lives. This feeling still hasn’t worn off, and I don’t know if it ever will.

Indie developers have been known to go to great lengths to fund their projects. Jonathan Blow, the developer of *Braid*, was forced to take out a second mortgage on his home<sup>75</sup>. Blow stated that the game cost him around \$200,000

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- IGN. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/02/state-of-decay-surpasses-2-million-copies-sold>

<sup>73</sup>Galindo, D. (2014, January 9). How much do indie PC devs make, anyways? (Part V). Retrieved November 1, 2014, from [http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DavidGalindo/20140109/208337/How\\_much\\_do\\_indie\\_PC\\_devs\\_make\\_anyways\\_Part\\_V.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DavidGalindo/20140109/208337/How_much_do_indie_PC_devs_make_anyways_Part_V.php)

<sup>74</sup>Reflections on an Indie Failure - *StarLicker* Postmortem. (2014, April 25). Retrieved November 1, 2014, from [http://indiegames.com/2014/04/reflections\\_on\\_an\\_indie\\_failur.html](http://indiegames.com/2014/04/reflections_on_an_indie_failur.html)

<sup>75</sup>Kate, L. (2014, March 10). The Indie Haven Podcast - Episode 37 (Jonathan Blow - *Braid* and *The Witness*). Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://indiehaven.com/the-indie-haven-podcast-episode-37-jonathan-blow-braid-and-the-witness/>

to create, and the development cycle took three years. When Microsoft tested the game the feedback was not positive. Despite this, Blow persevered with his project<sup>76</sup>. In 2006, the game would win the Independent Game Festival's Innovation in Game Design award<sup>77</sup>.

In 2009, Jeff, from JeffonGames, investigated if there was truly any money to be made making independent games. For his analysis, he proposed a baseline of \$40,000 a year for a single person to live on. From this amount he calculated the amount of games a developer would have to sell in order to meet the baseline. He looked at three different distributor services including iTunes, Xbox Live Indie Games (XBLIG), and Steam on PC.

On iTunes, with Apple taking 30% of the purchasing price, a developer selling their game for \$1 would need to sell 57,000 copies a year. On XBLIG, a developer selling at a minimum of \$2.50 would need to sell 22,800 copies. Most indie games for XBLIG would only reach a around 5000 downloads, though Jeff points out that at the time the Indie Game section within Xbox Live was difficult for users to find. On Steam, it was found to be easier to sell a game (even with a percentage of the profits being taken), with only 9000 copies needing to be sold at \$5 a year.

Jeff concluded that in order for a developer to be successful, they needed to be one of the following: a single developer with a good game; solo or on a small team with a short release cycle between games; or a developer that is already successful and has been able to get on more popular services such as Xbox Live Arcade or PlayStation Network<sup>78</sup>.

David Galindo from Vertigo Games wrote about sales for *Spirits of Metropolis*, a game he developed while in college. In its first year, the game only sold 31 copies, making just \$430 for Galindo. Other problems also plagued the game's success, including piracy when the game was placed on a "deal a day" website with no Digital Rights Management (DRM) attached. Galindo claimed that he failed when it came to marketing the game. Out of the more than forty sites he e-mailed looking for portals to host his game, only a couple replied showing interest in the game. There were also other problems, including how he mis-marketed the game's trailer, and he did not integrate the game's website with his own in order to give itself and himself more exposure. Galindo ultimately said that tackling the game with such limited experience was not one of his "smartest moves," but it did help him learn a valuable lesson<sup>79</sup>.

Many developers live very meager lives in order to get their game to market. The pressures on them are often as personal as they are financial. Having to ask parents for money, living on a friend's couch, and then not being able to

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<sup>76</sup>Gibson, E. (2009, March 25). GDC: Braid cost 200k to make, says Blow. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/gdc-braid-cost-200k-to-make-says-blow>

<sup>77</sup>The 12th Annual Independent Games Festival - 2006 Finalists & Winners. (2006, March 1). Retrieved November 1, 2014.

<sup>78</sup>Is There Money To Be Made? (2009, July 28). Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://www.jeffongames.com/2009/07/is-there-money-to-be-made/>

<sup>79</sup>Galindo, D. (2009, September 6). I bake games. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.gameproducer.net/2009/09/06/spirits-of-metropolis-sales-stats/>

make payroll can take an emotional toll on those who want to make games independent of corporate structure. The extreme measures these developers must take in order to keep their projects afloat create many opportunities for corrupt practices.

### 3.2 How Independent Developers find Funding, Fame, and Publicity

For any developer, finding the funding to make a game is a top priority. Even if a game is made by one person, that person still needs to cover their own living expenses while in development. This may entail living off of savings or having a full-time job.

However, if the developer does not have the ability to self-fund a game's development, then they must find some sort of venture capital. Increasingly, venture capital is being raised through "crowdfunding" sites such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and Patreon. Kickstarter and Indiegogo function by having the person or group searching for funding set a financial goal of any amount and a timeframe to raise the money. People then pledge money to the project; if the goal is met, the promised funds are collected and the project is funded. If the goal is not reached, all pledges are canceled and no money is collected.

Patreon functions differently in that there is no goal or set project and money is collected every month from donors and paid to the artist. On Patreon, people essentially "fund the lives" of artists, allowing them to pursue their craft full-time.

Another option for a developer is obtaining grants. Generally these grants are for educational software but can also be large enough to keep a developer in business during the early days of a new product launch. The developer can then use the remaining funds to work on another game. The founder of Irrational Number Group, Pennington Ingley, used this approach. Irrational Number Group is a startup publisher of casual games and educational software. Ingley did not have an issue making an educational game, as it allowed him to work on his own projects in the future<sup>80</sup>.

Even if a developer finds funding for their game, it is still necessary for the game to be enough of a success in order to pay back any debts, make a profit, or fund future projects. For this, marketing is essential. While an indie game does not need a huge marketing push, potential customers need to know of its existence first.

The Independent Games Festival (IGF) is the largest annual gathering of those in the indie video game industry and is held annually at the Game Developers Conference. Its stated purpose is "to encourage innovation in game development and to recognize the best independent game developers." IGF attempts to create for the independent game community the same advantages the

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<sup>80</sup>Thompson, M. (2010, January 18). Searching for gold: How to fund your indie video game. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2010/01/searching-for-gold-the-challenge-of-indie-game-funding/>

Sundance Film Festival brings to the independent film community. It is produced by UBM Tech (formerly the CMP Game Group), who also produce the Game Developers Conference, Game Developer magazine, and Gamasutra<sup>81</sup>.

Winners of IGF awards receive a cash prize as well as important prestige and publicity associated with the awards. Several past winners, such as Fez, Braid, Minecraft, and Papers, Please, have gone on to achieve success commercially in part due the recognition achieved through these awards.

Indie developers need to take advantage of any free publicity they can acquire. Getting a major gaming news publication to even mention their game can go a long way towards creating buzz. John Graham of Wolfire, the developer behind Overgrowth, detailed on Gamasutra how they were able to get extensive coverage for their game:

‘When you’re just starting out, cold emails are pretty much what’s gonna happen,’ he said. It’s hard to know what’s going on when they don’t respond whether it’s in their spam or ‘they just don’t like you,’ but keep trying.

In the offline space, you should go meet local indies. He admitted that being in San Francisco makes that easier than it may be in some other places, but it’s still good to try. ‘The fact you’re all here [at GDC] is a good thing, because you’ve got a great opportunity in front of you. Remember that conference does not equal vacation,’ he said.

You should also get out there and meet the press. If you do, ‘you’re not the random dude, they’re actually like “oh, that was the guy in the lumberjack beard who showed me his game.” ’

If an indie game is to achieve success they have to do more than design and program games; PR is very important to business. If all potential customers knew exactly what every game on the market was, where to find it, and which games they would like, the situation would be radically different. A developer could only focus on the design and programming, since that would be the only actions that would directly affect both sales and player enjoyment.

However, players are not omniscient. There is a great risk of making a game that a customer would enjoy yet never hear about. While this issue exists for all games, the problem is more severe with lower-budget games<sup>82</sup>.

Another key resource indie developers can use to market their game is the press, which has a wider reach than one person marketing alone. However, there are potential problems when indie developers reach out to journalists, as Chris Priestman from Indie Statik points out. He notes that the ways developers reach out to him cause him to feel suspicious:

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<sup>81</sup>The 17th Annual Independent Games Festival - About. (n.d.). Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://www.igf.com/01about.html>

<sup>82</sup>The Big List Of Indie Game Marketing. (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2014, from <http://www.pixelprospector.com/the-big-list-of-indie-game-marketing/>

It's no longer 'Can you have a look at my game, please?' Now every sentence is a compliment of the website I write for and my writing, and perhaps they'll even link to something I wrote and point to it to show that they read it and enjoyed it. My usual suspicion is that they just picked out a random article I wrote five minutes before sending the email to me.

Reaching out to press for coverage of a game sometimes becomes just this – efforts to woo them over. To befriend them so they can be favored. I'm a friend with benefits. But we're not really friends.

The problem? My fear? Maybe it works.

A main concern of Priestman's is how easily accessible he has become to developers and how they use themselves to emotionally blackmail him, either to guilt him into giving a favorable review or to make him feel bad after he has written a bad one. In one example, Priestman talks about an article he wrote when he was still new to the industry. He had gotten to know a developer and ended up writing a review of their game. Despite the game having a number of flaws, he states that he was "deliberately shy about it because [he] didn't want to upset that person."

Priestman believes that while a friendship between a journalist and a developer is not much of a problem in itself, there is definitely a problem in how friendship can affect coverage. He fears that even if he filters out a friendship from an interview, it may still unconsciously alter what he says about that person and their game. In closing, Priestman says that the conversation regarding relationships between developers and journalists is worth having, and the unavoidable conflicts of interest should be taken into consideration as well<sup>83</sup>.

Independent developers have a number of avenues available to them in order to increase public awareness of their games and obtain funding for more expensive projects. However, many such avenues require a great deal of perseverance and dedication on the part of the developer. This desperation can sometimes lead to unethical practices, particularly in garnering publicity from the press. This raises some concerns as developers may see a perceived friendship with a journalist covering them as an opportunity to gain favorable reviews from the press.

### 3.3 Conflicts of Interest Between Indie Developers and Journalists

Developers being too friendly with journalists has been acknowledged and discussed numerous times within the industry. With so much money and work on the line, it is understandable that developers would use whatever avenues are available to get much-needed coverage of their game. Friendship between a

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<sup>83</sup>Priestman, C. (2014, October 22). Indie Statik. Retrieved November 9, 2014, from <http://archive.today/ndZt6>



developer and a member of the press is not a problem in itself. A problem can arise in how it affects coverage and damages the credibility of the media.

An equally disturbing issue is the frequency with which financial relationships develop between members of the press and developers. It is not difficult to imagine a situation where an author writing an article could easily see a change to gain personally or financially when given an opportunity. This is why the Society of Professional Journalists state in their Code of Ethics that,

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.<sup>84</sup>

In recent months, several questionable and inappropriate relationships have been made public that have further damaged the public’s trust in the video game media. First, there was the relationship between game developer Anna Anthropy and Patricia Hernandez.

On June 26, 2012 Patricia Hernandez, a writer for Kotaku, published a blog post stating she intended to “move to Oakland with Anna [Anthropy].” Later in December, a Twitter conversation between Hernandez, Anthropy, and others discussing a meetup demonstrated that a friendship still existed between the two.



Figure 5: Twitter conversation between Anna Anthropy (@auntiepixelante) and Patricia Hernandez (@xpatriciah) setting up a dinner meetup.

Hernandez later published an article about one of Anthropy’s games, Drink. This occurred 4 days after their friendly meetup.

Hernandez published another article about one of Anthropy’s games on January 15, 2013; this time about The Hunt for Gay Planet. An update has since

<sup>84</sup>Society of Professional Journalists: Improving and protecting journalism since 1909. (2014, September 6). Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

been added disclosing that Hernandez and Anthropy were housemates in the summer of 2012. This update was not made until August of 2014, once details of the relationship were made public.

On March 30, 2013, another Twitter conversation between Anthropy and Hernandez took place, suggesting that they were still living together.



Figure 6: Tweets between Hernandez and Anthropy.

This conversation shows that as of April 2013, Hernandez was thinking about moving back in with Anthropy. Whether this ended up happening is unclear, but the possibility existed that their friendship was still close.



Figure 7: More Tweets between Anthropy and Hernandez.

Hernandez covered Anthropy once again in October 2013. As with the previous article, an update disclosing the relationship was added in August 2014<sup>85</sup>.

<sup>85</sup>Patricia Hernandez Covered Her Friend's Games, And Didn't Disclose It. || Talkingship – Video Games, Movies, Music & Laughs. (2014, August 26).

Hernandez and Anthropy appear to have been very close friends for a long period of time, yet Patricia Hernandez continued covering Anthropy's games without disclosing the nature of their relationship. After this relationship was discovered, Kotaku editor-in-chief Stephen Totilo posted a statement that all relationships perceived to be in breach of ethical conduct will be disclosed in the future<sup>86</sup>.

Shortly after that statement was published, it was also revealed that Hernandez had promoted games for another developer friend named Christine Love without disclosing their relationship. As a result, two more of Hernandez's articles were updated to note that Love and Hernandez were friends<sup>8788</sup>.

There seems to be an egregious lack of professional distance between Patricia Hernandez and these subjects. She had not only personal but also financial relationships with developers, and then wrote articles on them. The readers of those articles believed they were getting an unbiased view of their products. After these revelations, readers cannot be sure that these articles were written without outside influences affecting the content.

Transparency, independence, and accountability are some of the foundations of ethical journalism. There is reason to believe that Leigh Alexander failed to observe these ethical standards when she also promoted the work of her developer friend, Anna Anthropy.

Leigh Alexander, Writer and Editor-at-Large of Gamasutra, is friends with writer Patricia Hernandez and developer Anna Anthropy. Their relationship can be discerned through postings made on blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. The first piece of evidence of the relationship between Alexander and Anthropy is a blog post from 2011 in which Anna Anthropy, Anthropy's girlfriend, and Leigh Alexander met at GDC. Alexander gave a referral on the girlfriend's behalf to be a writer at a gaming media outlet. There are also personal tweets between Anthropy and Alexander going back to 2011<sup>89</sup>. They include exchanges about having dinner together<sup>5</sup>, spending time at each other's homes<sup>90</sup>, and chumminess regarding one of Alexander's favorable articles about Anthropy<sup>91</sup>.

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Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://talkingship.com/wp/2014/08/26/patricia-hernandez-anna-anthropy-kotaku-controversy/>

<sup>86</sup>Totilo, S. (2014, August 26). A brief note about the continued discussion about Kotaku's approach to reporting. We've long been wa. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/a-brief-note-about-the-continued-discussion-about-kotak-1627041269>

<sup>87</sup>Hernandez, P. (2013, August 22). Video Game Asks Players To Bake Real Cakes For Virtual Girlfriends. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/video-game-asks-players-to-bake-real-cakes-for-virtual-1183623826>

<sup>88</sup>Hernandez, P. (2014, July 28). The Steam Achievement That Nobody Unlocked. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/the-steam-achievement-that-nobody-unlocked-1610073943>

<sup>89</sup>(n.d.). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from [http://www.pictureshack.us/view\\\_70557\\\_screenshot-tweet-com-search-1.png](http://www.pictureshack.us/view/_70557\_screenshot-tweet-com-search-1.png)

<sup>90</sup>Alexander, L. (2013, May 2). @daphaknee is it ok w you guys to have dinner tonight at 730 instead of 7? i'm way behind a couple deadlines and even a lil extra time helps. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://twitter.com/leighalexander/status/329994964635381760> <https://archive.today/tlz1X>

<sup>91</sup>Alexander, L. (2013, May 2). Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://twitter.com/leighalexander/status/330152763679989761>

Between May 2011 and October 2013, Leigh wrote at least 7 articles featuring Anna Anthropy. Their relationship was not revealed to readers in these articles.

As a friend to both Hernandez and Anthropy, Leigh Alexander can also be tied to Patricia Hernandez's conflicts of interest in writing about Anna Anthropy's games. Personal tweets going back to 2011 connect Leigh Alexander and Patricia Hernandez<sup>92</sup>. In addition, Patricia Hernandez, Leigh Alexander, and 8 others co-authored a book published in October of 2012. They were also Facebook friends<sup>93</sup>.

Despite Leigh Alexander's apparent breaches in journalistic ethics, she has been uncritically featured in mainstream media stories regarding the recent controversy involving video game media<sup>94</sup>, and even wrote an article about the controversy for TIME<sup>95</sup>.

Leigh has also been implicated in another possible breach of ethics at The Guardian. A leaked internal Guardian e-mail sent on September 23rd stated, "Again DO NOT RESPOND to this idiotic campaign. Leigh will be coming in to morning conference to talk about Gamergate soon."<sup>96</sup> Journalists should report facts independently, separate advocacy from reporting, and expose ethical violations within journalism. The implications of this e-mail are troubling.

This is not the only occasion in which The Guardian may have breached journalistic ethics in regards to video game reporting. On September 1, Guardian writer Jenn Frank wrote an article entitled "How to Attack a woman who works in video gaming," claiming there was a "hate campaign" against women in gaming. She wrote of developer Zoe Quinn:

Earlier this month, Quinn's ex-boyfriend published intimate details of their relationship online, and her sexual history inexplicably became the centrepiece of a large-scale, industry-wide debate about journalism, nepotism and ethics.

It was quickly revealed that Frank was a financial supporter of Quinn on Patreon, and the article was later appended with the footnote: "Update: Jenn Frank has purchased and is a supporter of Zoë Quinn's work, although this is the first article she has written on the developer. Frank has also briefly met Anita Sarkeesian."<sup>97</sup> This footnote was expanded further several days later and currently reads,

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<sup>92</sup>(n.d.). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from [http://www.pictureshack.us/view\\\_15267\\\_screenshot-tweet-com-search.png](http://www.pictureshack.us/view/_15267\_screenshot-tweet-com-search.png) <https://archive.today/sYACy>

<sup>93</sup>Alexander, L. (2013, January 7). Facebook. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://archive.today/PgrQ7>

<sup>94</sup>Wingfield, N. (2014, October 2). Intel Pulls Ads From Site After 'Gamergate' Boycott. Retrieved November 1, 2014, from <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/intel-pulls-ads-from-site-after-gamergate-boycott/>

<sup>95</sup>Alexander, L. (2014, September 5). Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody Is Winning. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://time.com/author/leigh-alexander/>

<sup>96</sup>(2014, September 23). Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://thelphretort.com/wp-content/uploads/GUARDIANEMAIL1.png>

<sup>97</sup>Frank, J. (2014, September 1). How to attack a woman who works in video gaming. Retrieved November 11, 2014, from <http://web.archive.org/>

An earlier footnote, appended on 1 September, made clear that Jenn Frank had purchased and is a supporter of Zoë Quinn’s work, although this is the first article she has written on the developer and that Frank has also briefly met Anita Sarkeesian. These facts had been included as a footnote by Jenn Frank when she filed her copy before publication but removed by editors because they did not fulfill the criteria for a ‘significant connection’ in line with the Guardian’s editorial guidelines. However, the Guardian wishes to make clear that it was an editorial decision originally to remove the original disclosure, not one made by the author, and we are happy to have restored it in the interests of full disclosure.<sup>98</sup>

As a supporter of Zoe Quinn on Patreon since July 9th, 2014<sup>99</sup>, Jenn Frank made monthly donations, which the footnote does not fully explain when describing her as a “supporter of Zoe Quinn’s work.”

Jenn Frank’s personal connection to Zoe Quinn is suggested in two tweets. On December of 2013, in a friendly exchange on twitter, Zoe Quinn wrote “Together we would be zen.”<sup>100</sup> On August 23, 2014 Jenn Frank wrote on Twitter, “[Zoe’s] idiot ex-boyfriend is the lying manipulative loser, and I resent buying his hotel room.”<sup>101</sup>

The footnote appended to Jenn Frank’s article fails to address the full extent of her conflict of interest. If The Guardian’s editors did not consider Jenn Frank’s initial disclosure of a conflict of interest worthy of mentioning, did they know the full extent of the conflict of interest? If Jenn Frank did not fully disclose her financial and personal connection to Zoe to her editors at the Guardian, she would be at fault. Regardless, Jenn Frank’s article further illustrates the issue of conflicts of interest in video game coverage. The Fine Young Capitalists

The Fine Young Capitalists (TFYC) is a self-described radical feminist group whose mission statement is “to create media using underrepresented labor [and] unexplored demographics to fund non-profit organizations, thereby creating the means for the production.”

TFYC’s current project aims to help a woman create her own video game through the support of a development team. They achieved this through an open call where women were encouraged to submit their ideas. The best ideas would then be presented on the internet for the public to vote on. The winner would then be given part of the profits with the rest going to charity.

In an interview with APGNation in September 2014 TFYC’s founder Matthew Rappard described how the organisation was born. Rappard explained that his

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[web/20140902115740/http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games)

<sup>98</sup>Frank, J. (2014, September 1). How to attack a woman who works in video gaming. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games> <http://archive.today/sgp9j>

<sup>99</sup>Jenn Frank. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://archive.today/LTvBt>

<sup>100</sup>(n.d.). Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://i.imgur.com/HkWh7j2.png>

<sup>101</sup>Imgur: The simple image sharer. (2014, October 26). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from <http://imgur.com/YfQf65J>

idea was to invest in women, and knew that as a radical feminist group, it was important to get people to understand that women as creators could be financially viable. Through this, Rappard hoped to “break down ideas established by the patriarchy.”<sup>102</sup>

On February 28, 2014 Zoe Quinn learned of the production through a Twitter follower and got in contact with TYFC to ask some questions. After asking about how the game’s profits would be split, Quinn proceeded to ask about the group’s policy on transgendered people, citing that she had a problem regarding a perceived policing of a person’s transition point. The group explained that the policy was to prevent men from lying about their identity in order to gain access to the project. Rappard would later clarify that the policy referred to a lifestyle transition, not necessitating surgery<sup>103</sup>.

In the APGNation interview, Rappard alleges that Quinn called the group exploitative, and he recounts a death threat he received as a result of Quinn’s PR manager Maya Felix Kramer posting his Facebook information online—a post which Quinn also shared and alerted her followers to. Following this, Rappard explained that the next day the group would receive a barrage of tweets calling them transphobic and exploitative. Rappard would also accuse Quinn of having taken the group’s website down through a denial-of-service attack in an attempt to disrupt the project from proceeding.

As a result of the blowback received, Rappard stated that one of their business partners pulled out. The \$10,000 the partner was originally going to contribute was eventually covered by Rappard himself. The campaign’s credibility would also be hurt by Google search results due to the amount of negative Twitter posts. This would lead to many video game design communities banning their threads on the misconception that they were scam artists.

It was following this that TFYC would approach Chloi Rad at Indiestatik, who was interested in doing an interview with the group. It was assumed that Rad would publish the interview; however, after stating that she would contact Quinn, communication from Rad stopped. Upon getting her attention through Reddit, Rad explained that Quinn had told her that the project was highly exploitative and transphobic, leading to Rad stating that she no longer wanted to be associated with TFYC. The interview was never published as a result. Rappard would explain the significance of losing the article:

An article is very important because it allows us to engage with social networks like Reddit (I.E. link to the article instead of our page) and the Chloi sentiment was repeated when Zoe was brought into the picture with other journalists. We contacted Zoe a total of 5 times before the start of the crowdfunding, twice by phone and twice by email, and once through Chloi. Before the crowdfunding portion

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<sup>102</sup>Seraphita, N. (2014, September 9). #GamerGate: An Interview with The Fine Young Capitalists. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://apgnation.com/archives/2014/09/09/6977/truth-gaming-interview-fine-young-capitalist>

<sup>103</sup>Are you a boy or a girl? (n.d.). Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://www.thefineyoungcapitalists.com/TransgenderPolicy>

started, we also sent Emails to Chloi and Maya Felix Kramer explaining we would not engage in crowdfunding if they deemed the project exploitative, nether responded. One of Zoe’s emails explained that we would hire her as a consultant on a project, it was not returned.

We were extremely worried about Zoe because of her experience in a GameJam, which she ended. We were seriously worried that a similar thing could happen to us.

TYFC was delayed significantly but was able to recover after turning to alternative sites such as 4chan, which raised \$22,000 on it own, reaching \$70,000 and putting the project back on track. Quinn’s rival game jam, Rebel Jam, was announced not long after her communication with the group, but as of yet has no start date or location.

There is evidence here that Quinn and her supporters and associates used their connections in the close-knit game media to derail competition for their own financial and ideological purposes. This story illustrates how harm can be done to even a charity-focused publisher when journalists allow their ties to developers to interfere with their ability to act independently.

The TYFC controversy is also important because, while they were attempting to defend themselves from accusations of transphobia and exploitation but were unable to get a press coverage from a major outlet, yet another game jam took place that did receive press. This was “GAME\_JAM,” a game jam reality show meant to give viewers an inside look at the inner workings of the rapid-fire game-creation process. One article about the event, which ended in failure, was written by Kotaku reporter Nathan Grayson.

In the article, Grayson describes the many issues that caused the game jam to go off track and be cancelled early. Much of the blame for the failure of the event was placed on Pepsi consultant and Protagonist CEO Matti Leshem. One source for the article, sound-designer Robin Arnott, was a longtime friend of Grayson. Another source, Zoe Quinn, was also a longtime friend who had included Grayson in the credits for her game *Depression Quest*<sup>104</sup>. What would come to light later through a blog post by Quinn’s ex-boyfriend is that within days of the posting of this article Grayson and Quinn’s friendship would develop into an intimate relationship<sup>105</sup>.

There appears to be bias in coverage here. TYFC, not having press connections, was unable to get the ear of the press to explain their side of the story. At the same time, connected individuals like Robin Arnott and Zoe Quinn were able to get press coverage and, in Quinn’s case, discuss future projects such as her own “Rebel Jam.”

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<sup>104</sup>Grayson, N. (2014, March 31). The Indie Game Reality TV Show That Went To Hell. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://tmi.kotaku.com/the-indie-game-reality-tv-show-that-went-to-hell-1555599284>

<sup>105</sup>Gjoni, E. (2014, August 17). Retrieved November 3, 2014, from <http://thezoepost.wordpress.com/2014/08/16/tldr/>

## 4 Communication Between Members of the Video Game Press

### 4.1 The GameJournoPros E-mail List

On September 17, 2014 Breitbart reporter Milo Yiannopoulos released details of a private Google Group used by many prominent figures in the gaming media. Started by Kyle Orland, Senior Gaming Editor at Ars Technica in 2010 (and previously a writer for Video Games Media Watch), it was explicitly modeled after “JournoList.”<sup>106</sup> JournoList was a private mailing list of hundreds of journalists and academics which was involved in a scandal alleging collusion and resulted in the subsequent resignation of Washington Post Reporter Dave Weigel<sup>107</sup>. Orland’s e-mail list, known as “GameJournoPros” (Game Journalism Professionals), included among its members freelance and staff writers, two community managers, a marketing executive at three game developers, as well as editors of Ars Technica, Polygon, Kotaku, Gamasutra, GamesReviews.com, The Verge, Paste Games, Gamepolitics.com, HonestGamers, Eurogamer, Engadget, Game Informer, IGN, PCGamer, Joystiq, Gamefront, LaughingSquid, GeekBox Media, and Xbox Wire<sup>108</sup>.

Of the released e-mails, the first regarding developer Zoe Quinn was from Kyle Orland, senior gaming editor for Ars Technica. In the e-mails he discussed whether to cover the story of a “game developer being attacked by the internet” out of legitimate public interest or not, considering he did not want to “reward the jerks by giving their issue attention.” He then wrote:

I’m not going to give the bullshit ‘journalism ethics’ excuse for these attacks the time of day... Maybe we should stick to twitter to boost the signal rather than our front pages... Maybe we should get a letter of support going around... Maybe we should use this as an excuse to give more attention to her work... I know I’ve been meaning to Review Depression Quest...

Ben Kuchera, who financially supported Zoe Quinn via Patreon<sup>109</sup> and also wrote about her game Depression Quest<sup>110</sup>, suggested that an Escapist forum

<sup>106</sup>Bravo, J. (2014, October 17). Corruption and ethical issues shown throughout #GamerGate. Retrieved October 28, 2014, from <http://medium.com/@KingFrostFive/corruption-and-ethical-issues-shown-throughout-gamergate-f3fbff119e8e>

<sup>107</sup>Kurtz, H. (2010, July 5). Howard Kurtz - Controversial exits of McChrystal and Weigel show downside of transparency. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/04/AR2010070404269.html>

<sup>108</sup>Yiannopoulos, M. (2014, September 14). Exposed: The Secret Mailing List of the Gaming Journalism Elite. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://www.breitbart.com/Breitbart-London/2014/09/17/Exposed-the-secret-mailing-list-of-the-gaming-journalism-elite>

<sup>109</sup>Ben Kuchera. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://www.patreon.com/user?u=66952>

<sup>110</sup>Hall, C. (2014, August 13). Depression Quest launches in spite of high-profile suicide and online threats. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://www.polygon.com/2014/8/13/5998567/depression-quest-launches-high-profile-suicide-robin-williams-threats>



On Tue, Aug 19, 2014 at 9:43 AM, Kyle Orland <kyle.orland@██████████> wrote:  
 If you are behind on the appalling doxing attempt against her overnight, read this first: <http://pastebin.com/v4DGSQqR>

The very first paragraph of that statement:

"This has nothing to do with games and is not a matter of legitimate public interest, but is simply a personal matter. I would hope and request that the games press be respectful of what IS a personal matter, and not news. This is explicitly about my private life, which has been regrettably forced into the public and framed by people who pose a threat to my safety and well being as well as that of the people I love. I would hope that the effort people have gone through to dress it up as anything more would not be enough to have those who see it for what it is take the bait."

I understand where Quinn is coming from, and want to respect her desire for privacy. At the same time, I do feel that there is some legitimate public interest in a game developer being attacked by "the internet." At the same time as "that", I don't want to in essence reward the jerks doing this by giving their "issue" any attention at all. (I'm not even going to give the bullshit "journalism ethics" excuse for these attacks the time of day. Even if there is any merit to those accusations, the sickening facts of these attacks easily overwhelms it)

But then there's this, from Quinn's statement:

"I have forfeited [my privacy] by being a "public figure" in a small community, while those who delight in assailing me hide behind their keyboards and a culture that permits it, beyond reproach."

That "beyond reproach" part is bugging me, because I would LOVE to use my platform to reproach this kind of behavior... but that would go against Quinn's valid and understandable desire not to have this personal matter publicized by the media.

So what's to be done? Maybe we should just stick to Twitter to boost the signal on this one, rather than our "front pages." (Quinn seemed initially OK with people retweeting her statement (<https://twitter.com/TheQuinnairrow/status/501644035593744481>) but then she took down the original Tumblr post, so who knows). Maybe we should get a public letter of support going around decrying these kinds of personal attacks, signed by as many sympathetic journalists/developers as we can. Maybe we should just use this as an excuse to give more attention to her work... I know I've been meaning to review Depression Quest since its Steam release.

Figure 8: Kyle Orland debates with the GameJournoPros group on whether to cover Zoe Quinn.

thread discussing conflicts of interest regarding Depression Quest be closed. At the time Kuchera made this request to The Escapist editor-in-chief Greg Tito, The Escapist had one of the only forums outside of 4chan, Funnyjunk, and Something Awful where the topic had not yet been banned.

On Tue, Aug 19, 2014 at 10:57 AM, Ben Kuchera <ben@██████████> wrote:  
 This is the thread: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/18.858226-Zoe-Quinn-or-how-video-game-media-may-have-been-exposed-as-a-pro-feminist-hugbox>

Someone signed up for an Escapist account just to post that thread, and try to spread alleged details of someone's sexual past in order to shame them. I'm not sure what your definition of harassment is, but that fits mine.

On Tue, Aug 19, 2014 at 9:16 AM, Ben Kuchera <ben@██████████> wrote:  
 This is the question: People are using your platform to harass a developer. Are you comfortable with that?

You received this message because you are subscribed to the Google Groups "Game Journalism Professionals" group.  
 To unsubscribe from this group and stop receiving emails from it, send an email to [GameJournoPros+unsubscribe@googlegroups.com](mailto:GameJournoPros+unsubscribe@googlegroups.com).  
 To post to this group, send email to [GameJournoPros@googlegroups.com](mailto:GameJournoPros@googlegroups.com).  
 Visit this group at <http://groups.google.com/group/GameJournoPros>.  
 For more options, visit <https://groups.google.com/d/optout>.

Figure 9: A couple of Ben Kuchera's GameJournoPros e-mails.

Some members on the list expressed desire to censor the topic and protect Grayson while others called out this behavior. Andy Eddy, Editor in chief of @GamerMagazine suggested outright censorship of the topic, writing,

I don't think we, as games press, should support furthering the story by commenting, editorializing or even allowing others to ruminate on [Zoe Quinn Controversy].

Andrew Groen, a writer at Wired suggested using the list to hide the coor-

dination of gaming media support for Zoe in an e-mail:

if others think the letter [of support for Zoe] is a good idea - we should do this entirely under the radar, organizing it through word-of-mouth and email rather than Twitter.

Sensing some impropriety, two members of the list voice concern. Jason Schreier, writing for Kotaku, said,

I think this incident has raised enough questions about the incestuous relationship between press and developers already.

Mike Futter of GameInformer echoes his concern, writing,

I would prefer not to be associated with this. It feels wrong to me. I think it feels very off to reach across the fence from journalist to subject in this way. I prefer professional distance, especially given the accusations being levied at us from outside.

One leaked e-mail suggests members of the list had discussed how to address the growing controversy regarding Zoe Quinn and the growing implications of corruption in gaming media. Having already dismissed the claim that this controversy was related to journalistic ethics as “bullshit” on August 19th, on August 27th Orland writes in the GameJournos group,

This whole thing is reaching the mainstream via Amanda Marcotte and The Daily Beast, who links it to the larger ‘misogyny in gaming’ angle.<sup>111</sup>

The “misogyny in gaming” angle became the lens through which the growing controversy would be portrayed by not only the video game media but the traditional media as well.

Kyle Orland would go on to apologize publicly one month after he sent these emails, attributing his words to an emotional response to Zoe Quinn’s ex-boyfriend’s releasing details of their private life. He writes in his apology, “Members often make suggestions of what they think ‘should’ be done regarding some issue or another, but these are rightly taken as off-the-cuff opinions to be considered or ignored, not marching orders from some grand cabal.”<sup>112</sup> While he claims that “cooler heads prevailed” within the group and no letter was written, his advice to keep the story out of their “front pages” was apparently heeded. A letter similar to the one suggested in the mailing list was written and released by game developers. He also claims that he had no part in covering GamerGate

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<sup>111</sup>Yiannopoulos, M. (2014, September 19). GameJournos Zoe Quinn email thread dump. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://yiannopoulos.net/2014/09/19/gamejournos-zoe-quinn-email-dump/>

<sup>112</sup>Orland, K. (2014, September 18). ArsTechnica. Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://archive.today/LhhIT>

because Casey Johnston wrote the two Ars Technica pieces discussing GamerGate, failing to mention that she too was a member of the GameJournoPros list<sup>113</sup>.

Even if just an emotional reaction, Orland's statements here show a blatant disregard for journalistic ethics. The Society of Professional Journalists recommends that news organizations should "Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant."<sup>114</sup> Orland did not observe this guideline, and went so far as to incite a one-sided narrative of the situation at hand.

There is reason to doubt that GameJournoPros list was not as benign as Kyle Orland suggested. Ryan Smith, who had been a member of the group for one and a half years, writes on his experience with its members:

In my year and a half in the group, I was often the only dissenting opinion in specific topics and most of the time I got totally ignored. Sometimes I was criticized or told I was off-topic. Sometimes I was warned I was 'creating a hostile environment' to specific people for disagreeing with them in an unapologetic way, and a couple times I was told I'd be kicked out of the group. The informal pressure to 'fall in line' with the groupthink was very strong.

It only got worse after Breitbart recently published a leaked thread from the GameJournosPros group that discussed coverage of the Zoe Quinn affair. In the group, I questioned where these journalists drew the line in terms of covering salacious stories involving sources and asked if they'd actually examined evidence. My inquiries were treated incredulously or ignored. When a small amount of pro-Gamer Gate people online began following me on Twitter and praising me and I began engaging with them, here's the response I got from journalists in the group: One said I was fueling harassment and threats, called me an 'asshole,' some blocked me on Twitter, or tried contacting my colleagues or editors in attempt to shame me into silence or have my bosses silence me.<sup>115</sup>

The evidence here suggests that several members of the media, working together, actively suppressed the free discussion of a news story in order to protect one of their own. Previous behavior of this kind in other fields of coverage has resulted in the discrediting of participants and, in extreme cases, outright firing or loss of jobs. However, as of this writing, none of the members of the GameJournoPros mailing list have faced any such consequences.

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<sup>113</sup>Yiannopoulos, M. (2014, September 22). The List: Every Journalist in the GameJournoPros Group Revealed. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://www.breitbart.com/Breitbart-London/2014/09/21/GameJournoPros-we-reveal-every-journalist-on-the-list>

<sup>114</sup>Society of Professional Journalists: Improving and protecting journalism since 1909. (2014, September 6). Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>115</sup>Smith, R. (2014, September 24). "A Weird Insider Culture" - Medium. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://medium.com/@ryansmithwriter/a-weird-insider-culture-d1c3cc644c29>

## 4.2 Reporter’s Dismissal after Exposing an Indie Developer’s Fraudulent Campaign

Destructoid writer Allistair Pinfof was investigating a potential case of fraud involving an Indiegogo campaign that sprung up in early April 2013. In the campaign, independent game developer Chloe Sagal defrauded online contributors to her Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign for what she referred to as a “life-saving surgery.” Sagal stated that she had a piece of shrapnel embedded in her body after a bad car accident, and she needed surgery to remove it or she would eventually die of metal poisoning. The project reached \$35,000 before being removed by Indiegogo. According to Eurogamer, when asked why the webpage was taken down, Indiegogo responded,

Indiegogo has a proprietary and effective fraud algorithm and when suspicious activity is detected the campaign is immediately suspended and all contributors are refunded. Indiegogo’s proprietary trust and security algorithms, and our community of credible, conscious participants help to make Indiegogo the world’s largest, most trusted global crowdfunding platform. When suspicious activity is detected, the campaign is immediately suspended and all contributions are refunded.

Chloe Sagal was, in fact, a trans woman who had intended to use the proceeds from her Indiegogo campaign to fund sexual reassignment surgery. In early May, Pinfof exposed this information about the crowdfunding campaign to the public. He also alleged that Sagal had told him not to reveal the truth or she would kill herself, which she later attempted despite his silence. Sagal made the apparent suicide attempt on a Twitch.tv stream.

Pinfof stated that he kept Sagal’s admission of being transgender a secret because he did not want her to commit suicide. He ultimately decided to reveal the truth of the campaign after she went ahead with her threat:

However, when a NeoGAF member said she is alive, I felt an obligation to tell the truth. With IndieGoGo and Twitch TV community harmed by her actions, colleagues suggesting I tell the truth, and seeing NeoGAF’s outpouring of grief over her false story, I decided it was time I told the truth. She was hurting everyone around her, virtually and physically, and I didn’t want to be a part of that. She turned her back on me and others that were offering her a way out and covering up her scam (is there anything more unethical as a journalist?), only to attempt suicide.

Pinfof’s tweets regarding the subject have since been deleted. Despite Sagal’s defraudment, Pinfof’s exposure of the campaign’s true motives led to his dismissal.

Another example of collusion in the aforementioned GameJournoPros Google group started on May 17, 2013. Yanier “Niero” Gonzalez went to GameJournoPros to consult with other editors, managers, and site owners over how

they would handle the situation. Throughout the week ending on May 18, 2013, Pinsof and Destructoid owner Yanier “Niero” Gonzalez had corresponded via a series of e-mails following Pinsof’s suspension. Certain comments he had made on Twitter regarding the controversy, which Gonzalez said contributed to his dismissal, were also discussed in these emails.

A few members in GameJournoPros recommended that “Niero” seek legal advice, while others called for Allistair to be terminated. Chris Dahlen, former editor-in-chief at Kill Screen stated,

[Niero said] ‘Allistair decides to post the facts on Twitter against our wishes despite not asking him to do so, and also publicly outs [Chloe Sagal]. It was an unconfirmed rumor prior to that.’

And by the way, I haven’t followed the story closely and I didn’t see the tweets. I think you should fire him because just based on the way you wrote the e-mail, you seem to think that’s the right [decision]

Jonathan Deesing, former G4 contributor and freelance game writer, agreed:

Yeah up until this point I was on the side of not firing the guy. This would have been a good opportunity to make an example of him while not firing him. People always love the reformed guy

Danielle Riendeau, senior reviewer at Polygon, believed that Pinsof deserved termination as well:

I’ve been following the situation with interest, and I feel for you, Niero. I think legal counsel is a very good idea, and I also think you probably \* should\* fire the writer in question...

One group member asked if Sagal should be questioned before a decision was reached. This suggestion was immediately dismissed.

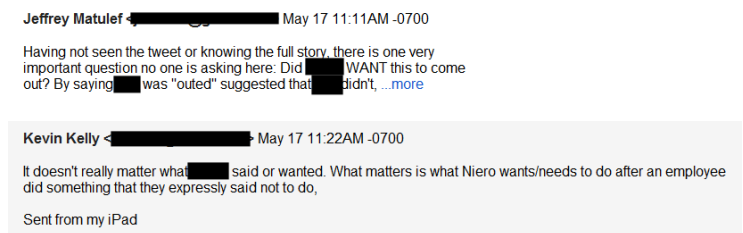


Figure 10: GameJournoPros e-mail exchange concerning the Pinsof debacle.

Pinsof asserts he was fired on May 17, the day that Gonzalez sought advice from GameJournoPros. On May 22, 2013 Pinsof was brought up again in GameJournoPros. Destructoid editor-in-chief Dale North started a thread titled “You-know-who may try to contact you,” stating,

Ugh. I can't tell you what to do, fellow EiCs, but I can advise on what you shouldn't do. Industry friends have informed me that a certain problem child has been reaching out to some of you

What followed was a stream of jokes from many on the e-mail list and a few members confused as to whom this "problem child" was until Kyle Orland wrote the following:

**Kyle Orland** <[REDACTED]> May 22 03:14PM -0400  
Oh, "he who must not be named" is just a silly superstition.  
ALLISTAIR ALLISTAIR ALLISTAIR!  
See? I didn't summon him just by mentioning his name. No lightning bolt from the blue striking me ...[more](#)

Figure 11: Kyle Orland identifies Allistair Pinsof over GameJournoPros.

The inference here is that Dale North intended to prevent Allistair Pinsof from getting future employment by using an e-mail list that included many of gaming journalism's powerful voices. As a result, Pinsof maintains he was unable to find anyone to listen his side of the story. In a post on Reddit, Pinsof stated,

So, I brought this proof to every major website. I thought if I were them, I would want to look into this as a journalist because this is a sweeping display of corruption within a prominent game business. If nothing else, hear the other side of the story because you can bet they've heard Niero's.

Except, nobody did. Nobody wanted to risk writing about a fellow game site because, in more ways than one, they are all in bed together. It's easier to keep the exclusive club intact than to tackle this ethically complex issue. And above all, there was no immediate financial incentive to reporting corruption in game journalism since it wouldn't get the views that reporting corruption in game studios would.

Allistair later adds,

I would later learn [Kotaku] blacklisted me and weren't the only one. Instead, I got Joystiq editor Alexander Sliwinski who called me out of curiosity and laughed at the absurd actions of Destructoid's managing staff. I felt hopeful. He said that would never happen at Joystiq because they can afford lawyers and don't throw staff under the bus. But in the end, it was all just a cute story for him to tell others for a laugh. He never spoke to me again or agreed to help me.

Instead, I got calls from other journalists involved in past controversies telling me that you can't trust other journalists to help you, and that you need to keep your head down and accept your situation. That situation being, the site you worked for is corrupt and no one else cares.<sup>116</sup>

Florida, the state in which many of these actions took place, has a law regarding wrongful combinations against workers. Florida Statutes state under title 31, chapter 448, section 045:

Wrongful combinations against workers.—If two or more persons shall agree, conspire, combine or confederate together for the purpose of preventing any person from procuring work in any firm or corporation, or to cause the discharge of any person from work in such firm or corporation; or if any person shall verbally or by written or printed communication, threaten any injury to life, property or business of any person for the purpose of procuring the discharge of any worker in any firm or corporation, or to prevent any person from procuring work in such firm or corporation, such persons so combining shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor of the first degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or s.775.083.<sup>117</sup>

In layman's terms, it is illegal for people to conspire to terminate a person's employment or to stop them from getting future employment. Blacklisting can involve slandering a person, recommending that another business not employ them, or actively creating a list of persons and their information to be disseminated to other businesses.

In conclusion, the problem with the GameJournoPros mailing list is that it consolidated too much power and influence in one place away from public scrutiny. The ability to shape narratives, promote personal ideologies, and create favorable circumstances for oneself is simply too great a temptation. GJP is an example of what Scottish philosopher Adam Smith meant when he wrote, "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>Usher, W. (2014, October 18). #GamerGate: Destructoid, Corruption And Ruined Careers. Retrieved October 31, 2014, from <http://blogjob.com/oneangrygamer/2014/10/gamergate-destructoid-corruption-and-ruined-careers/>

<sup>117</sup>Wrongful combinations against workers, Florida Statutes, § 448.045

<sup>118</sup>Smith, A. (1776). 10. In *The wealth of nations* (Vol. 1, p. 152). London: Dent ;.

## 5 Steps taken by the Industry to Address Ethical Concerns

In the last few months there have been some changes to ethics policies in the video game media. Editor-in-chief at Kotaku Stephen Totilo stated that writers for that site are no longer allowed to donate to developer Patreon campaigns<sup>119</sup>. Kotaku has also retroactively disclosed Patricia Hernandez’s relationships to her subjects. Totilo went even further in an interview with YouTuber John Bain (also known as “TotalBiscuit”), stating that there would be “more disclosure than ever” on the site. He acknowledged that when Nathan Grayson wrote about a developer with whom he had a friendly and then, shortly thereafter, romantic relationship with that there was an appearance of impropriety. However, he also made it clear that he feels Kotaku has no need for a formal ethics policy<sup>120</sup>.

Destructoid made note to its readers that its relationship with Anthony Burch and Gearbox would be made explicit on all editorial content relating to his company from that point forward<sup>121</sup>. In addition, Polygon now discloses contributions made to crowdfunding campaigns such as Kickstarter, Patreon, and Indiegogo<sup>122</sup>.

Defy Media, whose subsidiaries include GameFront, Screen Junkies, Chickipedia, The Escapist, and The Gloss, have gone the furthest in their efforts to address ethical concerns. The Escapist has spearheaded the initiative, clarifying its stance on the matter by establishing a formal ethics code that was made effective across the board. It has also published articles debating the specific nature of the concerns and allowed discussion of the topic on their forums<sup>123</sup>.

The reforms taking place in various sites are good first steps towards re-establishing ethical standards in the press and a workable level of trust with readers. However, much more needs to be done to negate elements of the media’s insider culture that actively encourages unethical, anti-consumer practices.

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<sup>119</sup>Totilo, S. (2014, August 26). A brief note about the continued discussion about Kotaku’s approach to reporting. We’ve long been wa. Retrieved October 25, 2014, from <http://kotaku.com/a-brief-note-about-the-continued-discussion-about-kotak-1627041269>

<sup>120</sup>Ethics in Games Media: Stephen Totilo of Kotaku comes to the table to discuss. (2014, October 29). Retrieved October 30, 2014, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpmIrWqEUVU>

<sup>121</sup>North, D. (2014, September 4). In light of recent events. Retrieved October 31, 2014, from <http://www.destructoid.com/in-light-of-recent-events-280654.phtml>

<sup>122</sup>Grant, C. (2014, August 26). On Patreon support. Retrieved October 30, 2014, from <http://www.polygon.com/forums/meta/2014/8/26/6071669/on-patreon-support>

<sup>123</sup>Defy Media Journalistic Ethics Guidelines. (2014, September 8). Retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/editorials/12224-The-Official-Ethics-Policy-of-The-Escapist>



## Conclusion

The video game industry is an important part of the global economy and an important part of people's lives. This report has documented events in the industry where the press has been involved in breaches of journalistic ethics such as undisclosed conflicts of interest, blacklisting, accepting "gifts" for reviews, and outright collusion, among other examples.

These practices actively harm the industry and must be addressed openly through reasoned and honest debate. Dismissal of these concerns, either explicitly through outright denial or implicitly through censorship, only exacerbates the problem.

Faced with this unacceptable state of affairs, it remains to be seen whether the video game press is capable of achieving the professionalism and standards that the industry deserves.