

Backlash and Sale: A Case Study on Corporate Image and Profitability of Video Game

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Abstract: Video game industry has rise rapidly. Platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, TikTok and Reddit has reached millions of users. Many video game developers have implemented social media as a tool of marketing and maintaining PR with its user base. Combining with more integrated marketing campaign and continuous engagement with its user base, corporate image of video game company can lead to consumer loyalty and therefore, effect profitability of the product. This could also backfire in developer's stead, as consumers are now more aware of their product than ever before. The existence of streaming and video sharing platform such as Twitch and YouTube means consumers can have a clear understanding of the product by watching other people play. Player may also form online community to share the praise or concern of existing product. Many controversial video games produced in recent years have received very different consumer feedback. Some, despite the initial backlash, remain commercially successful, while other faces dire consequences that damage both short-term and long-term profitability. The purpose of this research is to analyze various cases of video game sale when the developer company is under scrutiny by stakeholders due to questionable business or CSR practices. The aim is to understand the relation between a damaged reputation or corporate image and the tangible commercial feedback from the consumers in the context of video game industry.

Keywords: Backlash, case study, corporate image, video game

1. Introduction

A video game may receive backlashes due to a wide variety of allegation. A title could be launched with missing features promised in promotional material, or incompatibility with certain hardware that result in significant performance issue. This was the case for CD Project Red (shortened as CDPR) title Cyberpunk 2077. The product has serious performance issue with the current generation console, which leads to the one of the channel distributor Sony completely pulling it off from its platform [1]. The company soon face class action lawsuits due to false advertising and misleading statements with hindered sale projection [2]. Corporate pricing strategy such as price hiking may leads to consumer backlash and induce a cost of potential goodwill, as demonstrated by Creative Assembly, who has engaged in price hiking since the launch of the title Total War: Warhammer 3. The most recent decision of rising the newest DLC by almost 150% led to extreme consumer backlash on social media, distribution platform and review site [3]. Internal struggle and

workplace misconduct such as sexual harassment may also lead to public outcry. This is the case for Activision Blizzard, and the company has experienced management crisis and settled a 35 million USD claim on Feb 3rd, 2023 [4], due to sexual harassment allegation, meanwhile the company still faces public scrutiny til this day.

The role of platforms, both distribution and social, are critical in these developments. Now integrated into the ecosystem of video game, they are a tool of research, PR and marketing for developers and corporations. For consumers, they are foundation of online video game community, which in turn increases the social interaction between players and may act as external communication channel to initiate activity such as protest and boycott [5]. This process functioned as an amplifier for good and bad opinion, which may have an effect on corporate image and impact purchasing decision. Streaming and video sharing platform also plays a key role as many developers release 'review copy' prior to public launch date to critics, who then publish the review online. Streamers also played a role in publicizing video game and function as opinion leader to influence sales [6].

This paper is aimed to study on the three aforementioned cases in detail to analyze the potential factor that contributed to the different financial performance. This includes analysis on their corresponding genre, the active community, market perception, the product itself, commercial performance, and opinion leader/influencers' role.

2. Case of a Faulty Product: CDPR and Cyberpunk 2077

2.1. Background

CD Project Red is a Polish video game developer and publisher based in Warsaw; the company has accumulated more than 80 million sales in total despite its relatively small product category. CDPR is most well known for its Witcher series, a single player RPG based on novel of the same name. Witcher 3 has reached 50 million sales worldwide, making it one of the best-selling games of all time [7]. The company also has its own distribution platform on PC through a subsidiary named GOG.com.

Cyberpunk 2077 is the newest title developed by CDPR and launched on December 10th, 2020. The project is revealed in late 2012, and similar to Witcher, the IP is based on a real-world counterpart. A gameplay demo is revealed during E3 2019, where it is shown that celebrity Keanu Reeves is employed to promote the game and work on motion capture for a main character. In 2020, CDPR delayed the launch twice due to hardware optimization concern and COVID-19, as per the company in their apology letter on X (formerly known as twitter) and distribution channel: "The biggest challenge for us right now is shipping the game on current-gen, next-gen, and PC at the same time, which requires us to prepare and test 9 versions of it (Xbox One/X, compatibility on Xbox Series S/X, PS4/Pro, compatibility on PS5, PC, Stadia) ... While working from home [8]."

By the time of the game's release, it is shown that problem persists in hardware optimization, and the game is missing many feature promised in marketing.

2.2. Case Analysis

The release of Cyberpunk 2077 is shown to have polarized review that drastically differ based on platform. One month after release on the major PC distribution channel Steam, 78% of 306491 reviews are positive. The same cannot be said for current-gen console, with PlayStation receive the most criticism that has led to Sony completely pulling of the game from its store and offer full refund to any consumer who purchase Cyberpunk 2077 prior to June 18th, 2021 [1]. Based on review platform Metacritic, the game average a 57/100 for critic and 3.8/10 for user for PS4. For Xbox One, the game average a 61/100 for critic and 5/10 for users. As a multi-platform video game

“in-house” substitution may be viable for console consumer, as they may refund the game on the current-gen console, then opt to play the game on PC instead.

A series of price fluctuation on CDPR’s stock is observed during the launch period based on historical record on Yahoo Finance. The researcher believes for a public trading corporation with only one title on the line, the stock price can be used as an indicator for market’s faith in the game’s performance and profitability. 2 of the most notable spikes are the announcement of second delay around October 27th, 2020, and the game’s launch on December 10th of the same year. There was a massive drop in stock prices. By December 10th, 2021, 1 year after the release, the stock price has dropped around 54%. This event signals the company is now facing backlash from both its consumer and its investors, with a class action lawsuit followed soon after.

However, the lawsuit is settled with a 1.85 million USD payment by Dec 16th, 2021, despite the rather serious allegations. As reported by Sean Hollister from the Verge: “While the settlement will likely have to be approved by a court, it sounds like the lead plaintiffs and their lawyers negotiated for a fairly tiny sum here in exchange for ‘relinquish[ing] any and all claims against the Company and members of its Management Board.’ That’s when you consider that the game had a development budget of over \$316 million... [2]”

The budget for developing and marketing for the product’s development is said to be entirely recouped by digital pre-order (purchase of the game prior to its release) alone, based on the statement issued by CDPR on December 11th, 2020 [9]. An investor notes on December 22nd, 2020, reveal the game has sold 13 million copies with refund subtracted [10], therefore making it one of the best-selling games for 2020. The commercial performance of Cyberpunk 2077 may not be as expected, but it is far from being a failure.

Outcry on social platform is also intense during this time. By the time this report is written, various analysis on YouTube has reached dozens of millions of views. A video analysis named “overpromise, sell, underdeliver Cyberpunk 2077” has reached 9.7 million views, a similar analysis named “Why Is Cyberpunk 2077 SO BAD?!” also reached 4 million. The sale number of 2022 is also a sharp deduction from the original 30 million by the end of 2021. The result can be an indicator to the exhaustion of consumer goodwill accumulated from previous title released. Studies from “When (not) to indulge in ‘puffery’: the role of consumer expectations and brand goodwill in determining advertised and actual product quality” shown: “On the other hand, firms with high source credibility have an incentive to overstate product quality. Given that actual quality levels are lower, and puffery is used more when credible advertising sources are available, our model suggests a signal processing problem for consumers that arises in the face of credible advertising [11].”

This would then indicate that CDPR has fallen into the short-term incentive to create quality discrepancy between the actual product and advertisement. The research conducted by Praveen K. Kopallea and Joao L. Assuncao also shown there is strong incentive for firms to conduct relationship marketing and do not engage in puffery practices when consumers are becoming more sensitive to quality and asymmetry of information becomes less common.

To this point, the researcher suggests the commercial performance of Cyberpunk 2077 remain a partial success primarily due to the existing brand goodwill through pre-orders and the game, while below expectation, can still be a respectable product in the correct platform, as demonstrated by Steam reviews. The popularity of social media and video sharing platform does provide a systematic reduction of information asymmetry and increase in consumer quality sensitivity, since a potential player no longer need to own the game to understand the good and the bad. This would suggest that CDPR no longer has the ability to engage in another market puffery, therefore the company has a strong incentive to return to a quality-oriented approach of product publication. The disappointed launch may also be used as a potential opportunity, since it creates a window for

consumer emotional transition, provided CDPR can deliver what was originally promised and go further beyond. Turning disappointment into delight allows corporation to capitalize the user experience and create consumer stickiness, thus empowering the emotion factor on creating consumer experience [12]. However, it will take serious effort now as the consumer likely associate the company with false advertising, therefore become more prone to undervalue the marketing efforts in the future.

3. Case of Price Hiking: Creative Assembly and Total War

3.1. Background

Creative Assembly (Shortened as CA) is a British video game developer based in Horsham. The firm was acquired by Japanese corporation Sega in 2005. The parent company also function as the publisher for CA on Windows operating system, with Mac and Linux releases handled by another firm named Feral Interactive.

The company is most known for its Total War series: a product line of strategy video game that belong to a rather niche market. Its most recent and most successful release, Total War: Warhammer 3 (shortened as TWWH3) is a collaborated product with another British firm Games Workshop, who produced tabletop war game titles such as Warhammer Fantasy Battles and Warhammer 40K.

The company engaged with a Downloadable Content (shortened as DLC) business model. A DLC can be defined as a payable content that is used to enhance an existing product that consumer can already access [13]. Similar to EA's DLC Strategy [14], CA uses the DLC model to direct sales, initiate a service relationship and maintaining a service relationship with its user base. The business practice of DLC is often criticized as player expectation of product versus expectation of service often clashes.

The DLCs can primarily be broken down to 2 categories: 'Faction Pack' which introduces a single entirely new playable faction, and 'Versus Pack' which introduce new units to existing factions. The previous Faction Packs were priced at 18.99 USD, and Versus Packs were priced at 9.99 USD. However, the recent DLCs have seen a continuous increase in price. Versus Pack "Champions of Chaos" released on August 23rd, 2022, was priced at 15.99 USD, Faction Pack "Forge of Chaos Dwarf" released on April 13th, 2023, was priced at 24.99 USD, and the most recent Versus Pack "Shadow of Change" released on August 31st, 2023, was priced 24.99 USD.

3.2. Case Analysis

Prior to the DLC price increase, CA is already criticized for its lack of continuous support despite the DLC model is supposed to initiate and maintain a service relation with its player. Developers kept a long list of known issues on Steam's discussion forum, with some severe bugs that impairs the playability of previously paid content taking months to address and many issues remaining unresolved. The dissatisfied users experience can also be reflected in review. On Steam, which is the predominant platform the title is played on, 61% of 19535 users are positive, therefore scoring the game a 'Mixed' reception despite critic score (based on 69 critic institution on Metacritic) scored a favourable view at 85/100.

The most recent price hiking with "Shadow of Change", which priced at 24.99 USD and is about 150% increase compared to previous Versus Pack DLCs, has caught major backlash for the company. The pricing was initially leak on August 4th and was confirmed on the 8th of the same month. The player base immediately reacted by leaving negative review on the steam store page. On August 17th, a statement made by CA's Chief Product Officer Rob Batholomew attempts to address the price hiking by stating:

“To get right into it: our costs are up. Unfortunately, that means that prices have to rise. We know any increase is going to be tough, which is why our prices have remained fairly stable over the past few years. The downside is that any increase today is going to be more noticeable.

There’s no good time to increase prices, and we have not taken this step lightly. However, this is the business reality of supporting WARHAMMER III and ensuring we’re able to offer the years of extra content that are currently planned [15].”

The statement immediately caught the attention of player community and media reports. Poor wording and the suggestion of massive price hiking is necessary to maintain a still-broken product did not sit well with the player. “The sharp increase of prices by sellers of necessary goods beyond the level needed to cover increased costs in circumstances in which buyers are in a vulnerable predicament” may be defined as Price Gouging [16]. While video game service may not be seen as a necessary goods, for existing player, it is essential for CA to maintain active support to retain the service relation which the player entitled. The statement issued effectively change the price hiking to price gouging, with the later being a more serious allegation and an indication that the company lacks corporate social responsibility [17]. A series of ‘Review Bombing’ then occur on steam, as from August 18th, 2023, only 12% of reviews are positive, thus driven the overall review back to “Mixed” and recent review to “Overwhelmingly Negative”.

The parent company SEGA was initially worried about TWWH3’s undisclosed sales number but said later update (prior to Shadow of Change) has brought major recovery [18]. As a subsidiary that is not publicly traded, CA does not publish its own sale data. For analysis below, the researcher has opted to use Steam’s tracking of in game user as the indicator for the game’s commercial performance, data are based in Steam DB.

A player retention analysis can be observed by tracking the number of players in game, since Steam offer such service. Historically, the game usually sees a sudden surge of active users after each release of DLCs. Through the tracking on Steam DB, the release of “Forge of the Chaos Dwarf”, a Faction Pack with the same price tag, saw an average 56427 concurrent player, almost double the player count in previous week. “Shadow of Change” only has a 25174 average concurrent player on its release date, while the week prior has 17870, therefore achieving only a roughly 41% increase. As far as commercial performance is considered, the new DLC achieve very minimum compared to its predecessor while painting a bad image for the company, likely further reduce consumer faith in its existing operation and future title.

There is also concern regarding the incentive behind such decision as CA has a new shooter title being developed. Players of strategy game genre tends to have a less diversified gaming portfolio while the market itself has very limited supplier due to small player base, therefore limiting their choice of substitution and grant the supplier more power [19]. This suggest that player may view CA’s practice as a form of betrayal, where the company is price gouging their strategy game and reduce its maintenance to develop a shooter (A title by CA in development) and appease a wider audience [20], but most existing players will not be interest in. Similar to CDPR, CA has accumulated significant consumer goodwill from previous title Total War: Warhammer 2 as the game has a “Very Positive” review on steam, with 92% of 84375 reviews being positive, therefore would leads to higher consumer loyalty and retention. However, the goodwill is likely drained already prior to the price gouging due to the constant lack of support and existing price increase. It also doesn’t help the new DLC, which is almost half of the price of a full triple-A title (usually priced 60 USD), was planning to be released in the same time of Baldur’s Gate 3 and Starfield, 2 blockbuster title released in August and September, respectively. The release time window likely offsets the supplier power granted by the naturally less diversified consumer. The problematic response by product officer also demonstrated a significant misunderstanding between developer and player. Combined, they lead to serious PR and potential commercial damage.

4. Case of Internal Struggle: Blizzard Entertainment and Diablo 4

4.1. Background

Blizzard Entertainment is an American video game developer and publisher based in California. Blizzard Entertainment then went through a merger with another industry giant Activision in July 2008, forming Activision Blizzard (for clarification purpose, the company will still be referred to as Blizzard). The company is currently undergoing a corporate acquisition by Microsoft through a 68.7 billion USD cash deal.

Originally a key player in Real Time Strategy Game, Blizzard has a wide catalogue of products. The company accumulate 3 major IP by launching Starcraft on March 31st, 1998, Diablo 2 on June 28, 2000, and Warcraft 3: Reign of Chaos on July 3, 2002. The company then expand into Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (Shortened as MMORPG) genre on November 23rd, 2004, by launching World of Warcraft, which still dominates the genre to this day. On Mat 24th, 2016, Blizzard launched the new IP Overwatch, which would reach 50 million sales and become one of the most popular video games of all time [7].

Blizzard engages with a wide range of business practices including both micro-transactions and loot boxes, and the company has moved on to a primarily live service model. While the company has faced fair amounts of criticism, it went through major accusation starting from 2021, when a series of allegations and accusation against the company or key management figure start to surface. Despite these incidents having nothing to do with actual product offering and business module, it has ripples through internet as various influential forces begin to partake in the situation [21].

4.2. Case Analysis

California Department of Fair Employment and Housing accused Blizzard over 'frat boy' culture on July 20, 2021. The filed lawsuit claimed that female employee experience constant sexual harassment, underpaid and retaliation, despite making up 20% of the workforce. The allegation accuses of inappropriate, sexualized joke and harassment against female employee, and would ripple through the entire industry in the years to come [22].

Blizzard denies the said allegation; however, the company's president J. Allen Brack would step down from his position, being the only named individual still working in Blizzard. Followed by Brack's leave, an e-mail written by a top executive tries to downplay the allegation resulted in serious employee response. On July 28th, 2021, employees staged a walkout attended by 350 people. The action was commonly supported by social media users, who would begin series of boycotting, according to Washington Post. Multiple video game news outlets soon join the fray by halting Blizzard coverage. Other allegations also occurred such as attempting to derail investigation and CEO Bobby Kotick considered purchasing news outlet to control narrative.

Throughout the series of events, some key figures for the upper management, including those from upcoming Diablo 4 (released on June 4, 2023) were identified as offenders, this includes director Jesse Mcree. His successor Luis Barriga and studio co-head Jen O'neal would also leave the company in the following month after allegation. Social media influencers also quickly catch up with the development, with blizzard boycotting and ridicule of the company's workplace culture becoming more rampant.

Research on corporate social responsibility disclosure on firm's sale performance reveals that [23]:

That organizations must be careful concerning CSR activities to heighten firms' OSP by acceptance of such practices and showing responsibility toward distinct stakeholders in today's competitive era. It is concluded that CSR activities, that is, responsibility to environment,

community, customers, suppliers, employees, and responsibility to government rules and regulations could play a significant role optimizing sales of the organizations.

A similar study on corporate image and reputation's effect on customer loyalty shows that in the service industry, it becomes difficult to pinpoint corporate image and associate it with offering [24]. This means that service providers need to make the intangible aspects tangible to the consumer. This may explain the commercial success of Diablo 4 despite allegations that has resulted in a 35 million USD settlement and a processing acquisition. Blizzard's second quarter report as a department of Activision Blizzard shown a record-breaking boost of sales following the game's release in June, with a 160% increase of year-to-year revenue to over 1 billion USD.

The split between a falling corporate image and shady reputation didn't stop the game from reaching its commercial success. While it may reach an even higher number if the lawsuit over workplace sexual harassment has never happened, the split between angry online comment and record-breaking sales seems to indicate that for most users, there is a lack of care for the internal struggle of their service provider, so long as they continue to receive acceptable services. The accusation is far from tangible for the average user and potential buyers of Diablo 4; therefore, it fails to effectively drive down the sales.

The fact that Blizzard is highly integrated into the international market could also play a role in contributing to the commercial success of Diablo 4. While less than the Americas, Asian Pacific and EMEA still contributed a significant portion of Activision Blizzard's income. As a company based in US facing against a lawsuit filed by labor organization of US origin, it is possible that the event has very minimum reach outside of North America, therefore very little impact on corporate image and reputation overall.

This is by no means, however, to say the accusations have not affected consumers through indirect means. Diablo 4 has experienced problems in its post launch services, such as the disastrous launch of a new patch that has led to an emergency rollback followed by public apologies. This may be the result due to multiple changes in management associated with lawsuit. However, it is impossible to assess if events like these are the result of a poor workplace culture or if they are associated with alleged accusation of sexual harassment.

5. Conclusion

By assessing the difference and similarity between the 3 cases, the paper can help to construct a better understanding of the relation between corporate image and commercial profitability in different scenarios, therefore help in the decision-making process.

The discrepancy between the 3 cases also shows the importance of tangibility for consumers. Blizzard's toxic workplace culture and the attempt to downplay its significance may have resulted in uproar on social media from activist and other social rights influencers, but it has led to virtually no tangible change for the consumer. The influencers do not act to dissolve the asymmetrical nature of product information similar to streamer or critic institution, therefore can only impact a very small selection of potential consumers. Cyberpunk 2077, even in its unoptimized, under-deliver form, remains a reasonably priced product under its 60 USD price tag as shown through review. Critics and streamer remarks will have impact on influencing consumer decision, however as the product itself is still reasonably priced for most players, the game will remain competitive at least on PC and next-gen consoles, where the game is properly optimized. CDPR has not been associated with corporate greed or false advertiser, therefore has enough goodwill accumulated from previous title to secure the minimum success for the newest product by pre-orders. The case of CA's TWWH3 had a very tangible effect on consumers in the form of a 150% increase in price. The company overestimated the consumer's tolerance by attempting to exploit its unique supplier position in a relatively niche market and pushes out a product that far too overpriced, while it has

completely spent its goodwill due to its negligence of maintaining the service relationship for the player. Therefore, it has brought consumer uproar and backlash that has direct impact on profitability and sales, both long term and short term.

Video game firms with significant consumer goodwill and/or supplier power may have incentive to make questionable corporate decisions such as pricing hiking or marketing puffery to ensure short term success or escaping an otherwise commercial failure. This strategy, however, must be carefully assessed based on long-term vision and supplier-consumer relationships. The presence of blockbuster titles, even if in a completely different genre, may result in a sudden surge of consumer options, therefore leading to a more quality sensitive consumer base, which makes puffery and price hiking less effective. A systematic review under the framework of Porter's Five Forces would be plausible prior to making any decision.

PR takes a key role in constructing a well-received corporate image and recoup a potential disaster. Misusing it, however, may further deteriorate consumer relations due to consumers perceive the company being tone-deaf. Apologies will need to be issued if the situation demands it, and a company should never attempt to price gouging the player base by implying the necessity of raising price. Goodwill is easily accumulated by releasing quality-oriented products but hard to regain after losing them. It is recommended that companies engage with a quality focused operation and do not engage in puffery, as it helps to facilitate goodwill and strengthen consumer loyalty, therefore creating a healthy bilateral relation between consumer and supplier. This is particularly important as the market is changing and developing rapidly, and consumer choice is becoming increasingly broaden.

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