Modding Video Game Brand Authenticity

Jacqueline Burgess
Lecturer, International Business & Program Cooridinator, Bachelor of Business
School of Business and Creative Industries
University of the Sunshine Coast
90 Sippy Downs Dr
Sippy Downs
QLD 4556
07 5456 5485
jburgess@usc.edu.au

Jessica Whyman
Honours Student
School of Business and Creative Industries
University of the Sunshine Coast
jae020@student.usc.edu.au

Keywords
Brand management, authenticity, modding, *Mass Effect*

INTRODUCTION
Various aspects of video game marketing and branding remain underexplored. For example, how players perceive the authenticity of a video game and how these perceptions might be influenced by player engagement behaviours. Brand authenticity involves a brand being seen to be dedicated to ideals, having a core set of values (Johnson et al. 2015), and is built-up in consumers' minds by stable, consistent brand behaviour (Moulard et al. 2015). As a result, brand authenticity is desirable for brands to cultivate and to understand the relationship between their consumers and their brands (Lude and Prügl, 2018; Preece, 2015). Video game players are known for their many and varied engagement activities that are often hosted and disseminated through active online communities and networks (Kim, 2014). A common form of engagement for video game players is the creation of mods, and these are often encouraged by developers because they derive economic, social, and technical benefits from them (Curtis et al. 2022; Kim, 2014; Sotamaa, 2010). However, how modding might impact upon consumer perceptions of a video game brand's authenticity remains unexplored. For example, if video game players deemed a video game to be lacking authenticity, would they attempt to fix or restore that authenticity via modding, or feel that modding the game might further impact adversely on its authenticity.

To address these knowledge gaps concerning video game brand management and brand authenticity, a mod and the *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* (BioWare, 2021), a remastered version of the first three *Mass Effect* games, were used as the contexts for this research. The mod selected was the Audemus' Happy Ending Mod (AHEM), which was released in January 2022. It was created to alter the ending of the final

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Mass Effect game to produce a 'happier' ending and was selected due to player protests and dissatisfaction with the original *Mass Effect 3* ending (Reardon et al. 2017). 786 comments dedicated to AHEM were downloaded from a forum on Nexusmods, one of the largest modding websites on the internet. These comments were posted between January 1 2022 and January 14 2023. 521 comments were removed from the analysis as they consisted of purely technical questions such as issues with glitches or installation instructions. The remaining 265 comments were analysed. The data analysis method combined non-participatory netnography (Scholz and Smith, 2019), phenomenographic (Åkerlind, 2012; McCosker et al. 2004), and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to investigate consumer feelings about how the mod impacted upon their perceptions of the *Mass Effect* brand authenticity.

Virtually every comment was highly positive about the idea of the AHEM mod as well as the actual mod. 97 comments were coded specifically as 'Excited'. The comments were generally short and expressed gratitude and excitement for the mod without providing any more details. For example: 'such a great mod! thank you so much for making it!!' Just 9 comments were coded as 'AHEM made the game less authentic'. However, even these comments were relatively positive: 'I will applaud your effort but I won't be using this (..).'

142 comments were coded as AHEM made the game more authentic. These comments indicated that the AHEM mod helped address and improve player perceptions of authenticity of the *Mass Effect 3* ending in the legendary edition of the game. With the mod installed, player perceptions and expectations of an authentic ending were enhanced and met. Players expressed that they had been disappointed and even betrayed by the original ending and the AHEM mod allowed them to experience something that felt like canon and authentic to the story and world of *Mass Effect*. The AHEM mod allowed them closure and satisfaction with the ending that they could not obtain with the original un-modded game. 45 players even noted that they were unable to play *Mass Effect*, or purchase the Legendary Edition specifically, without a happy ending mod such as AHEM. For these players, the entirety of the game had lacked authenticity to the point where it was distasteful or not entertaining to play. Therefore, for some players the modding and engagement behaviours of the *Mass Effect* players who created AHEM were required for them to perceive the *Mass Effect 3* ending and games as a whole as authentic.

The results of this research suggest that perceptions of video game brand authenticity can be restored or altered by player modding engagement activities. However, this raises questions about whether players would always be happy to undertake such time consuming activities (Poor, 2014) as creating the AHEM mod to alter or restore a video game brand's authenticity. Further research could be conducted exploring when and why players would be willing to undertake modding and engagement activities to restore or alter video game brand authenticity.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Åkerlind, Gerlese. 2012. "Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods." *Higher Education Research & Development.* 31(1): 115-127. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.642845

Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Curtis, Joanna, Gavin Oxburg, and Pam Briggs. 2022. "Heroes and Hooligans: The Heterogeneity of Video Game Modders." *Games and Culture*, 17(2): 219-243. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211026255

Johnson, Allison, Matthew Thomson and Jennifer Jeffrey. 2015. "What does brand authenticity mean? Causes and consequences of consumer scrutiny toward a brand narrative." *Brand Meaning Management* (*Review of Marketing Research, Vol. 12*), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1548-643520150000012001

Kim, Jin. 2014. "Interactivity, User-Generated Content and Video Game: An Ethnographic Study of *Animal Crossing: Wild World*." *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies,* 28 (3): 357-70. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.893984

Lude, Maximilian and Reinhard Prügl. 2018). "Why the family business matters: Brand authenticity and the family firm trust inference." *Journal of Business Research,* 89: 121-134. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.03.040

McCosker, Heather, Alan Barnard and Rod Gerber. 2004. "Phenomenographic study of women's experiences of domestic violence during the childbearing years." *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing,* 9(1): 1-16. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Phenomenographic-study-of-women's-experiences-of-McCosker- Barnard/59c4ef3794f1639b7dfed889dddd8c9659ce87d4

Moulard, Julie G., Carolyn P. Garrity and Dan H. Rice. 2015. "What makes a human brand authentic? Identifying the antecedents of celebrity authenticity." *Psychology & Marketing* 32(2): 173-186. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20771

Preece, Chloe. 2015. "The authentic celebrity brand: unpacking Ai Weiwei's celebritised selves." *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(5-6): 616-645. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2014.1000362

Poor, Nathaniel. 2014. "Computer game modders' motivations and sense of community: A mixed-methods approach." New Media & Society 16(8): 1249-1267. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813504266

Reardon, Daniel, David Wright and Edward Malone. 2017. "Quest for the Happy Ending to Mass Effect 3: The Challenges of Cocreation with Consumers in a Post-Certeauian Age." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 26(1): 42-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2016.1257742

Scholz, Joachim and Andrew M, Smith. 2019. "Branding in the age of social media firestorms: How to create brand value by fighting back online." *Journal of Marketing Management* 35(11-12):1100-1134. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1620839

Sotamaa, Olli. 2010. "When the game is not enough: Motivations and practices among computer game modding culture." *Games and Culture* 5(3): 239-255. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009359765

Game References

BioWare. 2021. *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*. California, USA: Electronic Arts.

BIO

Dr Jacqueline Burgess is a Lecturer, International Business and the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Business in the School of Business and Creative

Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research investigates the marketing and business aspects of the creative industries. She has collaborated with various practitioners and small businesses as part of her research. Her work has been published in multiple peer-review journals including the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Game Studies*, *the International Journal on Media Management* and the *Creative Industries Journal*, presented at academic conferences, and covered by local and international news outlets.

Jessica Whyman is an Honours student in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia exploring censorship in young adult literature. Jessica also has a law and justice degree and spent 13 years working in criminal law within the Queensland Government. She is a former New Columbo Plan Scholar and spent time studying in Japan and Malaysia in 2022 and 2023 including working as a marketing intern for Mattel Malaysia.