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Making of Wars: Analysis of the Franchise Management of *God of War* and *Gears of War*

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MAKING OF WARS: ANALYSIS OF THE FRANCHISE MANAGEMENT OF *GOD OF WAR* AND *GEARS OF WAR*

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ABSTRACT

Two of the most prominent franchises in the video game industry are *God of War* and *Gears of War*. These franchises, produced by Sony Interactive Entertainment (SIE) and Xbox Game Studios (XGS), respectively, and their presentation through company blogs offer insight into the franchise management strategies and franchise conceptualizations that their parent companies have. Understanding these franchising aspects furthers knowledge on how these companies, two of the three largest video game producers, engage in franchising behaviors through discourse. Utilizing a framework of the discourse of franchise paratexts, this thesis examines those franchising tactics and discursive frames that the companies use as well as how they compare to each other, due to their market position as competitors. Through a discourse analysis of 49 blog posts (27 from SIE; 22 from XGS) over the last two development cycles (2018-2022), this thesis discovered that while both companies use the blogs as a marketing tool, SIE engages in more artistic and community framing while XGS focuses on product marketing and direct consumer outcomes. As such, their differing frames provide insight into how the franchises are conceptualized: an artistic achievement for SIE and a part of a product line for XGS.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of my grandfather, Bill, for always believing that I could reach this point, despite the obstacles I faced and even when I doubted myself. I miss you, Grandpa.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The production of culture through media products has long been a point of study and scholarship dating back to at least the 1940s. This research tradition has sought to understand the processes and institutions by which producers, directors, and writers spend years building their visions for screens around the world, both for watching and playing by consumers. In the realm of video games, this has become increasingly relevant as the largest developers in the industry produce games with massive budgets and teams that resemble the film and television industries. For the longest running game franchises like those that will be examined within this thesis, *God of War* and *Gears of War*, their development teams have gone through several evolutions and faced multiple industrial challenges while enacting their artistic visions.

In late 2002, the gaming industry was at a turning point. Sony Interactive Entertainment (SIE) was nearly two years into the life of their now-iconic console, the PlayStation 2 (PS2), and Xbox Game Studios (XGS), then known as Microsoft Game Studios, was a year into the life of their first console, the Xbox. These two companies had entered a world dominated by the longstanding video game industry giant, Nintendo, with the successful intellectual properties (IPs) of *Pokémon*, *Zelda*, and *Mario*. This forced them to think about how to break into the world of gaming and be successful when competing against Nintendo, despite Sony's early success with the PS1 (Caldwell-Gervais, 2019). Out of these efforts came the idea to develop flagship IPs, as Nintendo

had, but to create IPs that appeal to a more mature audience and with a focus on cinematic storytelling (Caldwell-Gervais, 2019; 2022).

As a result of these decisions, Sony's Santa Monica Studio was given the green light to begin work on their project, *God of War*. A year and a half later, after seeing public footage for the game from SIE displayed publicly, Xbox Game Studios tasked Epic with developing a direct competitor to *God of War*, which became *Gears of War*. These two franchises became two of the most recognizable in gaming history, winning dozens of awards over the past two decades, and are ongoing with more installments to come. As such, consideration of the franchising techniques between these competing IPs offers insight into how franchises distinguished themselves from each other not just through the content of the games but also an array of marketing and discursive spaces meant to build brand identity and quality.

While the study of these games is not novel to scholarship (Cassar, 2013; Conway, 2020; Švelch, 2022), this thesis examines the development of these two game franchises through publicly available media paratexts (blog posts) produced in partnership with the development teams as they made these games. Discourse analysis was used to explore the developers' utilize discourse in the posts as a part of their franchising strategy. This discourse analysis focused on how these companies utilized the blogs as a marketing space in different ways to accomplish their broader franchising initiatives and the ways that they present those tactics through discursive frames.

This analysis of the blog paratexts sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How did these developers use official company blogs as a part of their franchising process?

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The research model that was used in this thesis to explore franchising strategies builds upon Gill's (2000) model of discourse analysis with the addition of paratexts (Gray, 2010) of media franchises (Johnson, 2013) as the points of analysis. Media franchising (Johnson, 2013) in particular serves as the conceptual framework to understand the enactment of franchise initiatives through these posts. This model seeks to build upon the work of video game industry studies by connecting the scholarship of game studies and media industry studies with an emphasis on Caldwell's (2008) notion that understanding cultural production requires examining the 'culture of production' (the processes that make up the creation, distribution, and management of media products).

This thesis examined several intersections of franchise management through discursive strategies through analysis of the game franchises' teams using blog posts to market their respective franchises. As a result, for the purpose of this thesis, it is essential to explore the following areas of literature: video game industry studies, media franchising and paratexts, and discourse.

Video Game Industry Studies

This thesis argues for an approach to studying the video game industry that includes the critical contributions of media industry researchers, demonstrating the important and, to date, underdeveloped relationship between these two subfields of research. This is because these subfields often describe similar concepts in the context of the media landscape but there has been limited scholarship that includes their

contributions together. Collectively, this research shows video game industry studies to be a vibrant subfield of research. While this thesis does not directly interact with all of these areas, it does contribute additional understandings of how franchise development is enacted as an extension of all of the industrial factors described here.

This section examines the following aspects of video game industry studies: economic studies of consolidation, tensions in creative production between different stakeholders, and scholarship on how creative workers navigate this industry. Collectively, these sections mobilize video game industry studies as a methodologically rich field which considers the relationships between creativity and commerce as complex, multivalent, and in flux processes.

The analysis of media practices and products has been evolving since its conceptual introduction in the 1940s; however, the contemporary scholarship that is salient to this thesis is best traceable to the early 2000s (Jaramillo, 2002; Williams, 2002) through scholarship on generating distinction through branding for entertainment media companies and is heavily informed by the contribution of Caldwell (2008) on the culture of media production, discussed at greater length below. This newer area of study explores the ways in which intra-industry practices and micro-politics inform the creation of cultural products such as films, television series, video games, etc. (Consalvo, 2006; Havens et al., 2009). This section will explore the foundations of the contemporary era of gaming and the ways in which industry has been researched under this more recent frame.

This thesis draws from the scholarship of both media industry studies and game studies. In contemporary contexts, these two subfields of research have been conducting similar research on content production (Caldwell, 2008; Consalvo, 2006) and industry issues (Cohendent & Simon, 2016; Rawley et al., 2018), yet they are often characterized as separate areas of research. The thesis seeks to bridge the two and, as such, adheres to Shaw's (2010) call to widen the scope of the cultural research into video games by including the work of media industry studies (Caldwell, 2008; Havens et al., 2009) alongside that of game studies (Consalvo, 2006; Williams, 2002).

As previously mentioned, this thesis research model is heavily influenced by Caldwell's (2008) discussion of media production culture. Caldwell (2008, p. 3) pointed out that media industry disclosures (both public and private) highlighted shifts in the ways in which the industry sees itself. This means that developers talking about their work demonstrates the construction of the industry from their perspective as producers and that this discourse offers insight into what he termed *industrial reflexivity*, a theory meant to explain how industry professionals constantly theorize about the value of their own work in public and during work. In subsequent research, Caldwell (2014) would call this the 'shadow academy,' which indicates that industry members form theoretical bases that are meant to inform and shape production processes that mirror academic practices. To investigate media industry phenomena, Caldwell (2008) forwards that understanding the production of culture requires understanding the 'culture of production' which is part of the franchising logics that the franchises in this thesis are built upon.

Across media, but particularly for the video game industry, the early 2000s was an era of 'distinction' as Sony and Microsoft sought to break into the Nintendo dominated market (Williams, 2002). For the game industry in particular, this era was defined by Nintendo's 'defeat' of Atari and Sega to be the face of gaming and controlling the entire handheld gaming industry while Sony and Microsoft introduced their home consoles, which Williams (2002) described in their study on the structures of competition in the US market of the gaming industry. These launches (and Nintendo's dominant status) highlighted what have become recognized and foundational tenets of the modern industry: (1) for broad industry success, console options (whether handheld or larger home gaming systems) need to be limited; and (2) large corporations' involvement in IP collection and distribution is the model for sustainable market presence (Williams, 2002).

The early 2000s era of gaming also sparked research into how the video game industry was broadly constructed and this is exemplified by the work of Consalvo (2006) and Izushi and Aoyama (2006) in their comparative analyses on the influence of existing systems in the growth of the gaming industry across the US, UK, and Japan which laid out both the history of gaming and its contemporary status. Consalvo (2006) specifically explored how the industry was being shaped by business models and found that the video game industry was largely a hybrid of Japanese and US business with strong ties to existing popular culture. Consalvo (2006) additionally emphasized the importance of the role of Japanese culture in totality on the gaming industry; this is due not only to the multiple crossovers of Japanese culture into popular culture at large but also to the fact

that the Japanese companies Nintendo and Sony had been setting the gaming market

standard with their products. Izushi and Aoyama (2006) would explore these aspects

further by looking at the origins of the gaming industry across the US, UK, and Japan and

note the differences in structure that may have given Nintendo the early advantage that

led to them dominating. While the gaming industry was founded in the US at MIT with

the creation of *Space War*, the growth of the business from that point was fundamentally

different between the US, UK, and Japan. While all relied heavily on arcade games for

growth in the 1970s, the US-based industry consisted of game developers (mainly Atari)

making their arcade games with a games production approach (quantity and market

saturation); in contrast, established Japanese corporations (like the former toy company,

Nintendo) were involved in arcade games development from their beginning and game

developers relied on the existing Japanese comic and cartoon industry for inspiration and

the creation of iconic characters (an IP first approach over a games first approach) (i.e.

Pac-Man and *Donkey Kong*). According to Izushi and Aoyama (2006), it was this

foundation (the synergy of the Japanese popular culture industry with established

companies) that enabled Nintendo's rise over even other Japanese companies with similar

approaches in spite of the video games crash that occurred in the US in the early 1980s.

Nintendo had made the Japanese model more efficient and cost effective in addition to

building multiple IP hits, with *Super Mario Brothers* (1985) as one of the early titles with

their first console (the 1983 Nintendo Entertainment System) (Izushi & Aoyama, 2006).

While the UK industry was developing at this same time, it was much more reliant on so-

called 'bedroom coders' than skilled industry professionals making them much less

broadly involved in the world industry until the mid-1990s when Sony (a Japanese company seeking to compete with Nintendo) purchased Psygnosis, now a part of Sony Interactive Entertainment.

This research laid the groundwork for the growth of game studies with Consalvo and Dutton (2006) discussing different methodologies for studying games through play and the study of games through consumption remains a large part of game studies (Cassar, 2013; Conway, 2020; Orme, 2022; van Roessel & Švelch, 2021). However, the shifts in media industry studies (Caldwell, 2008; Havens et al., 2009; Perren, 2013) aligning with other game studies work is more important to this thesis. Examples of this scholarship are Tschang's (2007) study on business influences on game creation and Shaw's (2010) examination of how games are studied in the context of how 'video game culture' is defined. This research examines industry developments and in particular the recent challenges for media industry, including the advent of online gaming as a fixture in the modern landscape.

Tensions in creative production is an ongoing area of research for media industry and game studies and demonstrates the crossovers between these areas. An early example of this is Tschang's (2007) exploration of the tensions between publishers and creators in the gaming industry. They identified the driving forces of these tensions to be a difference in defined goals with publishers putting more emphasis on financial outcomes and developers caring more about innovation and their beliefs on what would grow interest in gaming (informed by many developers having gaming play backgrounds) (Tschang, 2007). As a result, developers and publishers compromise often within the

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industry with a common outcome being developers agreeing to continue making games with established IPs or popular genres but publishers giving them the freedom to innovate within those parameters, which was seen in the newer installments of both of the franchises analyzed in this thesis for their fourth and fifth installments (Tschang, 2007).

However, resource distribution remains a point of contention for these two parties as other researchers have found (Ahmad et al., 2017; Paris & Mahmoud-Jouini, 2019) which is why Tschang's (2007) description of the balancing of these tensions is not a novel occurrence but an active part of industry. Creative tensions have been further explored in Rawley et al. (2018) and Paris and Mahmoud-Jouini (2019), though their research employed a broader vision over creative industries as a whole. Rawley et al. (2018) explored how conglomerates affected designers in the fashion industry and discovered that the amount of creative awareness that were possessed by business decision makers determined how involved they became in the work of the designers. This means that not only is there a negotiation between the creatives and the financiers but that there is an additional navigation of how informed the company-side professionals are that affects how they manage the designers. Rawley et al. (2018) concluded that the companies that were more aware of how hands on they should be based on their level of design awareness tended to be more successful than those that were not. These findings relate to the work of Paris and Mahmoud-Jouini (2019) in their broad examination of the process of creation across all creative industries as they identified the steps of production for creators: inspiration, framing, prototyping, and validation and related that to organizational ends. They found that these processes, while they could vary dramatically

in length or management across the different sub-industries, largely depended on the flexibility of the larger publishing entity in terms of outcomes (Paris & Mahmoud-Jouini, 2019). This implies that the more aligned the organizations and creatives could be on what the end goal was, the more efficient (on time and on budget) the process of creation could be.

This scholarship on industry navigation also included case study work on specific instances of tension management with examples being Cohendent and Simon (2016)'s study on Ubisoft Montreal's 'crisis of creativity' and Ahmad et al.'s (2017) explanation of how to build a successful video game launch after the failure of *Duke Nukem Forever*. In the case of Ubisoft Montreal, the Always Playing program failed in its goals of driving more innovation through a reorganization of routines at the studio. The installation of this program was in response to an issue of creativity that was driven by tensions between the editorial and core creative teams with their different goals not being negotiated and a lack of communication between parties (Cohendent & Simon, 2016). While the initiative itself failed, it did identify a different path for routine organization that Ubisoft Montreal would set afterwards which Cohendent and Simon (2016) identified as a possible solution to tension navigation. This means that shifting intra-industry structures can be a viable option for tension management for media production companies, especially in conflicts that stem from debates over creativity in comparison to efficiency (Cohendent & Simon, 2016). Ahmad et al. (2017) explored how the all around failure of *Duke Nukem Forever* demonstrated, through contrast, what the elements of a successful video game launch are, pointing out that the game had been through too many delays and console and

software iterations during its over a decade long development cycle that were not accounted for in exchanges and planning between the developers and the publishers. According to their case study, developers in contemporary game creation must be familiar with all stages of development and production to avoid the issues that led to the failure of the game. This symbolizes that not only are producers having to learn more about the development side in contemporary media production (Rawley et al., 2018), but that developers are required to more fully understand the producer and distribution parts of the industry.

In addition to the tensions in industry that have been researched, new challenges to the video game industry is another area of examination for researchers with new console generations (Yadav et al., 2019) microtransactions (Gibson et al., 2022; van Roessel & Švelch, 2021), and industry environment issues (Cote & Harris, 2021; Curtis et al., 2022; Švelch, 2022) being centers of the most recent industry scholarship. The study of the rapid growth of online video game streaming through the rise of Twitch has also been of concern for researchers who study video game industry developments (Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Orme, 2022; Ruberg et al., 2019) which warrants addressing but is not as relevant to this thesis.

Because the analysis of these blogs examines them as marketing spaces, it is important to have some familiarity with emerging economic practices in the video game industries such as microtransactions. In exploring the development of modern consoles, Yadav et al. (2019) explains how console designs have increasingly decreased the gap between the performance of PCs with excess in capabilities being a central design

principle. They also point out that this design principle is driven by game developers who want to make games with better graphics, loading times, and frame rates encouraging console designers to continue to coordinate with makers of the most up to date graphics cards as they design and integrate new technologies into their consoles (Yadav et al., 2019). As mentioned previously, this means that long running game franchises have had to consider this escalation of console capabilities in their game design.

The increase in console capabilities has also made games more expensive to make as developers seek to utilize the features of new consoles as part of the selling points of their games. This increase in the costs of development have resulted in some video game companies to integrate a controversial form of monetization into their games known as microtransactions. This method of money making is extremely common in the games as a service community with games like *Fortnite* being free to play and download but requiring players to spend money for cosmetics or access to season passes that offer exclusive content and the highly contested (both legally and ethically) loot boxes (van Roessel & Švelch, 2021). This particular style of monetization evolved out of the trading card industry with the same concept being at the heart of loot boxes and microtransactions. In order for a player to gain access to the 'full' game or gain an advantage over their competing players, they have to spend money to further their progression into the game in step with how trading card games like *Magic: The Gathering* work (van Roessel & Švelch, 2021). As a result of the financial success of this format, many video game companies have hired specialists to direct the addition of microtransactions into their games despite fierce protests from players and critics. Some

of these criticisms and legal contestations of microtransactions, loot boxes in particular, point to how the design and marketing of these features mirrors gambling (Gibson et al., 2022). Despite these concerns, microtransactions remain a growing section of the industry with some traditional retail games that are not free to play also including microtransactions in their new games (van Roessel and Švelch, 2021).

Beyond microtransactions, there are several other issues that have arisen in the video game industry environment. These include the increasing concerns with 'crunch' (Cote & Harris, 2021), the hierarchical relations in the industry (Švelch, 2022), and the role of modders that industry members, especially the larger companies, contest (Curtis et al., 2022). 'Crunch' is an unfortunate component of labor in the gaming industry and Cote and Harris (2021) explored how 'crunch' has been perpetuated by video game developers to the point where most gaming workers now see 'crunch' as inevitable. They point out that 'crunch' has existed in the industry for a long time with developers working inordinate hours closer to the deadlines of development cycles but that recent iterations of 'crunch' had become much more pronounced with workers effectively living at their offices for weeks to finish a game as part of the development process (Cote & Harris, 2021). Cote and Harris (2021) found three themes that have led to the normalization of crunch: the unmanageable creative industry, anti-corporate ethos, and reinforced industry stereotypes of game designers as 'passion' laborers. The unmanageable creative industry component is a construction of developers that arises from their views on how adaptable they have to be to new console generations or broader industry shifts in design which was part of what Ahmad et al. (2017) found. The anti-

corporate ethos exemplified the tensions between how game developers saw themselves and their relationships to their financial overseers as pointed out by Tschang (2007). The final component of reinforced stereotypes of labor in the industry shows how the crunch can be perpetuated by making light of the reality of harsh working conditions by describing crunch as evidence of the passion that developers have for their work (Cote & Harris, 2021). Cote and Harris (2021) concluded that crunch would have to be addressed for the industry to continue its growth; this is relevant to this thesis as developers discussing the management of crunch for the game designers is a part of the analysis of the development of the franchises.

The structures of contemporary industry is also of recent concern in research as the changes in game production in terms of accreditation (Švelch, 2022) and the role of modders (Curtis et al., 2022). Like the blog posts examined in this thesis, Video game credits offer insight into how industry leaders present (and market) the contributions of different development team members and this was examined by Švelch (2022) to identify how game developers were constructing hierarchies within their games. Švelch (2022) found that games that adopted more cinematic styles (the flick-sync) tended to include opening credits that mirrored the film industry and that voice actors were being prominently featured alongside lead designers in many games; this highlights the impact that the genre pioneered by these franchises has had on the industry in terms of how other developers present themselves and their structure through credits as both of the franchises in this thesis had sequences that were included in Švelch's (2022) analysis. It is the counter to this hierarchical structure that was the point of analysis for Curtis et al. (2022)

as they studied what the role of modders was in gaming communities as well as how industry members viewed modders. They found that the modders were perceived as a threat to existing developer structures by many industry members as they would create new systems within or modify existing video games to add new content that developers saw as unethical work and making the role of modders illegitimate from the perspective of game developers (Švelch, 2022). While modding will not be a part of this thesis analysis, its role in the development of the industry is noteworthy and connected to the franchises in question with *God of War* (2018) having multiple mods added to it since its release (Caldwell-Gervais, 2019). Overall, though, the developments of and changing of industry structures over the course of these franchises will be an important part of this thesis analysis which is why it was important to examine recent work on industry dynamics.

Due to XGS's blog including discussions on *Gears of War* Esports, an additional area of contemporary research into recent developments of the video game industry is that of the rapid growth of streaming of games online through the advent of the platform Twitch (Consalvo, 2017; Taylor, 2018). As a part of the public exposure that game franchises have, the scholarship on Twitch is important to consider as part of the overall logics of franchising. This research has examined the many elements of this recent addition to the industry with the role of Twitch (Consalvo, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019); the reasons for audiences to engage with streaming (Orme, 2022), and the labor of streaming (Johnson, 2021; Ruberg et al., 2019) all being niches of this research into this new industry component.

Game design is also an important part of the material analyzed in this thesis and it is specifically referenced by the blog posts that were analyzed. Differing from the broader concept of game development, game design specifically focuses on the mechanical and graphical aspects of video games (Burgun, 2012). In the explication of game design theory, Burgun (2012) noted that the theories informing game design were fluid and changing due to the fact that games tend to be heavily built upon an understanding of the current hardware generation as well as popular consumer interests at that time. For example, the first three primary installments of the *God of War* franchise were all fixed-perspective, hack-and-slash, linear games due to the popularity of those genres at the time as well as the limitations that PS2 and PS3 had in terms of RAM to load a more open game concept. Burgun (2012) also argued that the concept or genre of the game in question would inform its design theory as open world, linear, and hub-center games all have different logics that inform their design. While these three genres cover most game design concepts, there are many other types that add further nuance to their respective design theory (i.e. first-person shooters, turn-based, sidescrollers, platformers, stealth-based, etc.).

As an additional design component, Both *God of War* and *Gears of War* utilize third-person design concepts. Third-person games are defined by players being able to see their avatar and control them from a point-of-view that is behind the avatar (over the shoulder in the case of both of these franchises). In analyzing the impact that this particular design has on player experience, Black (2017) concluded that, in comparison to first-person games, third-person games could actually immerse players into the game

world more as they experience the game through the avatar rather than through the avatar's vision. In order to advance the understanding of how game design can be practiced, Kumari et al. (2018) sought to further game design theory by explaining how performative magic offers designers a way to conceptually understand how to build their games. This research explains how many of the behind-the-scenes mechanics of games are meant to make the players believe in the game experience by making the interactive features of the game seamless. In addition, due to the limits placed that a game engine places on design, games have to create illusions for hidden movements and choices so that the game can function, just like performative magic (Kumari et al., 2018). In order to avoid immersion breaks, these illusions in design are necessary. For example, in the *Gears of War* games, when the avatar is hit by an enemy character's fire from out of the frame, a bold red line indicator will let the player know where they were shot from so that they can adjust to it. If this feature was not included, it could make players feel frustrated about dying from damage that they could not see and break their play immersion.

In terms of practical aspects of game design, world loading is one of the most important challenges that game designers face. This issue is due to the limitations of the hardware's RAM as well as the capable range of the graphics card that is integrated into the console (Nenad, 2018). For the most recent releases of the two franchises discussed in this thesis, from 2016 on, this issue has become of significant concern due to the hub-open world system that they have employed requiring much more attention to loading techniques or disguising them (Kumari et al., 2018). To address these design concerns, procedural generation has become one of the most important methods of world loading to

prevent pop-in (when objects suddenly appear on screen while playing) or load delay (moments where the game freezes for a few seconds in the middle of player action) (Nenad, 2018). This method of world loading is important to understand for the franchises discussed here because of the size and level of visual fidelity that the developers have put into the most recent installments on the newer generations of hardware, requiring designers to consider how to load the game with the software engine that they use.

Paratexts and Franchising

While paratexts and franchising are large areas of study, this thesis will be focusing specifically on the conceptual understandings of Gray (2010) on paratexts and Johnson (2013) on media franchising (all procedures that expand upon, continue, or frame entertainment media texts) as well as the scholarship that built on their work.

Paratexts are defined by Gray (2010) as all of the additional media products that are created alongside 'main' media pieces. For example, as part of the production of any game, there are a number of paratexts that can be created alongside the game itself including trailers, blog posts, advertisements, books, and documentaries. According to Gray (2010, p. 7), the best way to view paratexts "focuses on paratexts' constitutive role in creating textuality, rather than simply consigning paratexts to the also-ran category or considering their importance only in promotional and monetary terms." This means that paratexts should be seen not as separate texts but part of the 'text' as a whole. In addition, paratexts can be used to identify the 'preferred reading' of the main media text in question (Gray, 2010). As such, paratexts are often part of marketing campaigns; for

example, the choice to include critical reviews in an advertisement or statements from the production teams about the 'quality' (Jaramillo, 2002) of the product would be paratexts attempting to highlight the way in which the piece would ideally be consumed by audience. In particular, these paratextual frames are efforts to shape the decoding process and guide audiences to the preferred readings of texts. Gray (2010) also argues that the 'text' is an ongoing construction for which paratexts can be employed to manage or direct. Examples of these kinds of paratexts would be re-release materials for a media product or making of documentaries.

As previously mentioned, paratexts include all of the additional materials around a main product; however, Gray (2010) emphasizes that while the casting of actors is not a paratext in of itself, it is a part of the framing of the text. For example, the choice by XGS to cast John DiMaggio to headline *Gears of War* as Marcus Fenix was part of the effort to bring name recognition to the franchise. In addition, Gray (2010) states that some media franchises may lean more into paratexts for main media product construction; this includes tie-in novels, comic books, spinoffs, or merchandise 'from the world' of the main text. This use of paratexts has become increasingly commonplace in modern media franchising with the games in question here being no exception as they use tie-in comics and novels to add to the overall narrative of the franchise. Gray (2010) additionally concluded that paratexts could be used for 'off-screen' media studies, meaning that studying paratexts could provide extra insight into the presentation of the production of media texts or provide an avenue to explore the perspective of creators in terms of the readings of the message of the product.

As paratexts contribute to main media products and the 'text', it is additionally essential to understand Johnson's (2013) work on media franchising as it provides further insight into how this thesis seeks to explore franchise production through paratexts. Modern media franchising traces to the proliferation of media product lines that began in the 1980s with production companies desire to build and maintain niche audience groups through a line of media products and paratexts (ex. the first line of *Star Wars* toys). As a result of the early and prolonged success of this approach to media production, franchising has now become seen as a way of life for most media companies due to the financial benefits (ex. the Marvel Cinematic Universe and all corresponding products). Furthermore, due to the fact that franchises are multiple installments of an intellectual property (IP) line, the navigation and management of industry tensions and structures becomes a crucial part of franchise development overall.

At their broadest level, franchises are emblematic of a merger of the production industry and the creation of culture as they involve long term developmental commitments and ongoing creative efforts with a given IP. In contemporary contexts, the franchise process entails management of multiple avenues that support the main text due to two major factors: (1) the convergence of the creative industry and (2) audience members as both consumers and editors media products (Deuze, 2007). This is why the IP itself is an example of industry tensions as the role of media franchising is to connect an IP with producers and that will in turn provide stability for the production team by offering direction (Johnson, 2013). However, an IP is a legal contract acquired by a media company that expects their production team to make a profitable media product

using that IP. As such, an IP embodies media franchise tensions by being the contract that

demands creative use by production teams by media companies. How these tensions are

negotiated is seen as a balance between difference and deference for the producers of

media (Johnson, 2013). This means that development teams must meet the financial goals

of their companies first and foremost, but they also have to keep some creative freedom

to make the franchises successful in the long term.

Recent scholarship into franchising practices demonstrates the breadth of

initiatives that companies participate in to create and enact their franchise with product

licensing (Johnson, 2019; Santo, 2019), franchise installments (Fleury & Mamber, 2019;

Thomas, 2021; Thomas, 2022), and fan management (Hanna, 2019; Stanfill, 2019) all

being crucial components of the franchising process for companies. The licensing of

paratexts for sale includes considerations of how the franchise can be perceived through

product creation, as was the case with Lego licensed products for movie franchises which

resulted in Lego altering their branding strategy to incorporate more visible diversity

initiatives (Johnson, 2019). This also offers an example of how industrial reflexivity is

practiced throughout the life of a franchise (Caldwell, 2008). In this instance, Lego

recognized that its branding was lacking diversity and that could be demonstrated through

movie licensing partnership sets (like the MCU or *Star Wars* sets) featuring more diverse

Lego models (in terms of physical characteristics). In addition, the retail spaces in which

franchise paratextual merchandise is sold become a part of the framing of the franchise,

and this is important because of the exclusive retail partnerships that some of the XGS

blog posts presented (Santo, 2019). As such, media companies may choose to enter into

exclusive partnerships with some retailers to feature their products in a manner consistent with the overall franchise model.

The management of fandom is a core component of the modern franchising space, with fans serving as consumers of the franchise and the target market for additional paratextual revenue. For example, as the analysis below will demonstrate, SIE is actively invested in maintaining fan relations through its blog space. Recognizing the role of fans as co-editors of the franchise (Deuze, 2007) is important in this management process as well, which is why fan engagement by members of the development teams for the game franchises in question could be employed as a fandom strategy (Stanfill, 2019). This is because, for media companies, a key component of franchise maintenance is fan management which entails conceptualizing what makes up the given franchise's fandom as well as how to exploit them for monetary gain (Stanfill, 2019). This is also why Comic-Con (a conference for fans of popular culture) has become a heavily saturated marketing space for media companies and the management of their franchises (Hanna, 2019). For franchising endeavors, Comic-Con serves as a site for media producers to engage their most avid fans as well as a place to promote their upcoming franchise installments and corresponding paratextual merchandise (Hanna, 2019).

Perhaps the most critical of franchising initiatives is the development of franchise installments themselves. This process includes the narrative development of the franchise text (Thomas, 2021), the importance of understanding and integrating casting choices (Thomas, 2022), and adapting to critical reception throughout the franchise (Fleury & Mamber, 2019). For the franchises in this study, narrative development was seen as a

way to establish distinction from Nintendo's franchises. The creation of narrative for video game franchises is a determining factor of success for the longest-running franchises in gaming and requires developers to create strong, relatable characters for the players (Thomas, 2021). In addition, the cast of the games is important as well, because the level of celebrity the voice actors can bring becomes a part of the franchise's identity (Thomas, 2022); this is especially true for *Gears of War* which invested in recognized Hollywood names (i.e. John DiMaggio, Michael B. Jordan, etc.) to further the goals of their franchise (Caldwell-Gervais, 2022). Additionally, the adaptation that occurs during the franchise from installment to installment is important to consider as well. This is because every installment of a franchise has the responsibility of continuing the established textual narrative as well as maintaining the franchise's reputation (Fleury & Mamber, 2019). In the context of video games, the additional factor of improving upon in game systems (graphics, animations, and skill scaling) is part of ongoing franchise initiatives. This is why understanding the critical reception of installments by both media critics and audiences is vital for media companies to manage their franchises. Furthermore, as an example, for the franchises in this thesis, the distinction between the mainline games and their spinoffs can be accentuated by critical reception as the audience distinguishes between the main text and its paratexts. This has happened for both *God of War* (resulting in some of the posts addressing aspects of the franchise that have been criticized) and *Gears of War* with two spinoff games (*God of War: Ascension* and *Gears of War: Judgment*) with poor critical reception which forced the developers to alter the upcoming mainline releases.

Discourse

This thesis primarily uses discourse as expressed through media paratexts to analyze these sorts of industry negotiations. Discourse itself is an incredibly broad term that encompasses a wide range of definitions and research analysis approaches; this thesis will be using Gill's (2000) definition of discourse as constructed 'texts' that are created and shared through multiple forms of media.

Discourse has its roots in the critiques of traditional social science, forwarding the argument that social construction is the principle upon which discourse is built (Gill, 2000). It is from this foundation that discourse is understood as constructed 'texts' which can take many forms (spoken, written, video, etc.) and the underlying social factors of those constructs (Gill, 2000). Discourse analysis was expanded through research in three main themes: critical linguistics, conversation analysis, and poststructuralism (Gill, 2000). Critical linguistics were concerned with the semiotic elements of language and how words were used to imply meaning (Fairclough, 1989; Fowler et al., 1979). Conversation analysis honed in on examining the action of engaging in discourse to achieve goals and explored social interactions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks et al., 1978). Poststructural approaches, while not specifically relevant to this thesis, critically explored the historical contexts of the construction of discourse (with an emphasis on historical power dynamics) and this was exemplified through the work of Michel Foucault (1981).

The application of discourse that Gill (2000) explains borrows from each of the three aforementioned research angles but is not specifically focused on one of these areas

over another. This model of discourse has four primary components. The first is examining the discourse itself; this means understanding the message of the discourse and its organization (Gill, 2000, p. 174). The second part considers the construction of the language that is used; this means understanding the contexts in which and by which the discourse is constructed (Gill, 2000, p. 175). Third, this approach also explores the action part of discourse; this means examining what the discourse is seeking to accomplish (Gill, 2000, p. 175). The final component of this approach is that Gill (2000, p. 176) emphasizes the need to consider the rhetorical organization of the discourse. This means that there is a need to examine the 'version of the world' that is being put forth through the given discourse.

Utilizing discourse analysis enables researchers to examine the framing logics that are being forwarded by organizations and companies through texts and can aid in the understanding of the conceptualized vision that these entities have of themselves, their audiences, and their products. This makes discourse analysis an especially useful method for analyzing media industries due to the amount of paratextual and textual framing practices that these industries practice. In particular, this thesis examined paratexts that are specifically used to manage the image and communicate the goals of the franchises to understand the discursive logic behind the different presentations of these franchises.

In the context of this thesis, the application of this model for discourse was consuming (reading) the content in the blogs and building an understanding and familiarity with the message of the texts. Then the posts were examined for how the events or contents described therein are being offered to understand the efforts to manage

the two video game franchises. The next step was to develop themes based on the consumption of the blog posts. Finally, posts were coded within the framework of the research questions so that they could be analyzed to understand how the teams tried to navigate industry tension and manage the development of the franchises.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This thesis uses discourse analysis to examine how a particular set of paratexts are part of marketing distinction strategies around these two franchises. The paratexts of the video game franchises that this thesis explores offer a chance to explore the franchising endeavors of Sony and Microsoft (IGN, 2015). The paratexts used here—official company blogs from their past two development cycles (2018-2022)—were produced in partnership with or directly by the development teams, which makes them distinct from other kinds of paratexts like narrative-tie-ins or merchandise (although sometimes the blog posts are simply promoting official merchandise). In addition, these blog paratexts are versions of electronic press kits, as described by Caldwell (2008). This means that they are paratexts that are crafted as 'news' releases and serve as a marketing material for the franchise. Because of the nature of these blogs as a space for directly enacted franchise management (published directly by franchise developers), the application of discourse analysis here examines how these companies are forwarding their franchise initiatives through their blogs.

This thesis used discourse analysis as the method because of its value in examining the subtext and connective themes of a series of texts (Gill, 2000). As such, with the aim of this thesis being to examine the franchising practices of SIE and XGS through their company blogs, discourse analysis offers a rich approach in identifying the ways in which the companies enact their franchising strategies. In addition, the use of

discourse analysis aided in identifying discursive themes that were different for each company for the concluding comparative analysis.

The blog posts (n = 49) were coded according to how each post reflected different elements of franchise management. A cursory examination of the blogs revealed that at the broadest level, these blogs served as marketing materials and demonstrated franchise management initiatives for both video game franchises. However, the discursive strategies perform franchise management in very different ways. Utilizing the primary cycle coding practices outlined by Tracy (2018), this initial reading of the posts similarities in phrasing or format that aided in the establishment of codes. Due to the differing discursive frames that each company employed, the resulting themes for SIE (three discursive themes) and XGS (two discursive themes) were different, demonstrating how franchise management can vary dramatically, even between direct competitors.

The application of discourse for this thesis was consuming (reading) the content in the blogs and building an understanding and familiarity with the message of the texts. The discursive themes were discovered through this process of primary cycle coding as consumption of the posts revealed the differing discourse that both companies engaged in, with SIE addressing a wider range of franchise aspects and outcomes than XGS. See Appendix B for more detail on the coding scheme and subthemes. The resulting themes for SIE were (1) innovative design (discussion of aspects of the game intended to improve the player experience), (2) highlighting quality (posting about the value of the game in comparison to the larger entertainment media landscape), and (3) showing appreciation (thanking team members or fans). The identified themes for XGS were (1)

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encouraging paratextual engagement (promoting merchandise and Esports with direct

consumer outcomes) and (2) enhancement features (discussing upcoming hardware

releases and new in game systems). These themes were identified due to repeated

phrasing or similarities in topic format (e.g., SIE team members talking about the

father/son dynamic in all of the storytelling subtheme posts under the highlighting quality

theme). The posts were then coded using this thematic scheme, with there being overlap

between some posts, more so for SIE than XGS due to the broader nature of its discourse.

See Appendix A for the application of the coding scheme to the blog posts and notes on

each post. Finally, a comparative analysis (Gill, 2000) between the discourse and

franchise management of both of the companies was conducted to examine how they

presented their respective franchises in both similar and contrasting ways. Additionally,

due to the nature of these franchises, the comparative analysis sought to provide further

insight into how the companies attempted to create distinction from and compete with

each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Following the coding and discourse analysis of the blog posts from both Sony

Interactive Entertainment and Xbox Game Studios, distinct themes for both organizations

emerged. In order to explain the outcome of these results, this section includes a

discussion of the themes of each company separately before comparing them to each

other to demonstrate their similarities and differences.

Sony Interactive Entertainment

For Sony Interactive Entertainment, the blog posts (27 in total) covered an

assortment of different topics ranging from story design to feature updates. The posts also

had a variety of authors (18 in total) representing several different departments and

subcategories of the design team, including representatives from gameplay, cinematic,

music, and the head director. The collection of authors demonstrates that, for SIE, these

posts are a way to demonstrate the breadth of their development initiatives by including

several different design departments. Furthermore, it allows the development team to

give perspectives from multiple areas of design and thus craft a larger narrative about the

quality of their product (Palomba, 2016). While these posts are a marketing material

paratext at their most basic level, the extent of viewpoints and topics that the blog covers

offer insight into how SIE want to portray their games as a true team effort. This

indicates that building an image of community interaction is a part of the franchise

representation that SIE engages in. The importance of this strategy of franchise

management is that rather than focusing on selling the games as a product in of itself, SIE

is trying to create a consumer community and that their blog is a key part of that strategy. The coding of these posts revealed three broad themes for SIE: (1) showcasing innovative design; (2) highlighting quality; (3) showing appreciation to fans and the development team.

Innovative Design

For the posts that included emphasis on the innovations in game design (7 out of 27, 26%) for the *God of War* franchise reboot, three subthemes were identified: combat design (two posts), game theory (three posts), and the added features due to hardware developments (two posts). This theme was embodied through the thematic framing of the game as an exemplar of video game design through several development aspects and targeted to describing and shaping the player experience. The posts that were coded as being emblematic of this theme would accentuate the complex mechanical aspects of the game and how it functions as a demonstration of the game's innovation.

Combat design included explaining how enemy characters were designed to be integrated into the flow of the game as well as the moves that the player was able to use with Kratos to adapt their preferred play style into the game experience overall (Turi, 2022). This also involved the authors talking about the difficulty settings that the players had access to for either giving themselves more or less of a challenge depending on their skill level or desire to play the game in a manner more suited to their liking: "It was important to us that players could experience the exploration at their own pace," (DiMento, 2018). This was especially prevalent in discussions of the 'Give Me God of War' difficulty setting in which enemy encounters required higher levels of skill for

players to complete them (Sheth, 2018). This game mode was crafted with the intention of pushing skilled players to their limit and Sheth's (2018) post clearly delineates that point by saying, "Give Me God of War is meant to test mastery of all the combat mechanics and tools available to Kratos and Atreus. The more you explore and attempt to master the combat system, the more you will enjoy the difficulty!"; however, the multiple difficulty options available were intended to make the game open to all players regardless of skill level. This was laid out by Danny Yeh (2019) in his explanation of how part of the understanding of combat design is that there has to be a trusting relationship between developer and player, that the game will not be too hard for players to realistically beat if they are not highly skilled at in-game combat. According to Yeh, "Players need to be confident that if they play properly, they will succeed. This the unspoken trust between a player and a game. If we break that trust, we run the risk of players feeling like the fight was cheap rather than challenging." This is because beating combat encounters advances the story and is the driving force for all in-game progress. The relationship argument that Yeh forwards is important because it shows how the developers (including the posts by DiMento and Sheth) want to make the gameplay match a player's chosen difficulty setting. For example, if the player chooses the 'Give Me a Story' mode, then as the easiest game mode, the game should be all around less difficult, especially the combat. In addition, addressing this trust in design element is noteworthy as difficulty setting scaling issues is something the franchise has been criticized for previously (Caldwell-Gervais, 2019). By specifically discussing an element that the franchise had received negative feedback on in previous installments, the post authors are furthering a position of the

latest franchise installments as being more innovative. It also emphasizes the relationship of the post as an attempt to build trust between the developer and the player. As a subtheme of franchise management, this corresponds with the arguments made by Fleury and Mamber (2019) on the importance of building upon the criticism of previous installments.

In the posts that focused on explaining game theory, the authors would do deep dives into boss characters (major antagonists or strong enemies) and encounter design as well as the main components of the game concept : combat, the father/son relationship and narrative, and exploration (called the three pillars by the developers) (DiMento, 2018). These components were the main foci of the game's development and the outline of these concepts drove the larger open world game design (Burgun, 2012). 'Combat' included everything regarding encounter design for the game with attention to wanting to make the player feel like a god while playing and have variance in enemy types and encounter spaces. The father/son dynamic was the main idea for all of the narrative plot creation for the game with Kratos and Atreus's interactions serving to inform the player about the world as well as push major plot points as their relationship evolves over the course of the game. Exploration as a pillar included all of the additional aspects of the game that players could interact with including side missions (extra content not necessary to beat the main story in the game), hidden loot (armor, weapon upgrades, in-game currency, etc.), and additional areas that were not part of the main story.

When elaborating on the boss encounters, one of the developers actively referred to the reasoning behind their decisions for the Valkyrie encounters as 'theory' by

prefacing the main body of the post with the quote, "Heavy spoilers and nerdy combat design theory talk ahead" (Yeh, 2019). Yeh stated this use of theory was meant to help create these fights to directly test different aspects of the game mechanics that players had to master (Yeh, 2019). While the use of the word 'nerdy' to describe 'theory' indicates a distancing effort from technical terminology for the team, the use of the word itself is consequential. This is because it denotes a specific construction of the game design as informed by intellectual principles and theoretical applications; specifically, this description of design aligns with Burgun (2012) and Black (2017) on open world and third-person game design. Additionally, this description of applied 'theory' also included discussions of how boss fight design was intended to be part of the storytelling flow with different actions or events that occurred during the boss fight helping to introduce the player to the game's world and important narrative plot points (Yeh, 2018). Yeh stated that, "We wanted the player to feel like a god fighting a god, with the environment around you paying the price," showing how combat design theory was being utilized at this point of the game. This discursive frame of the use of theory mirrors the suggestions made by Kumari et al. (2018) to use in-game features to draw players into the world. In this instance, by having the environment around the two characters fighting being extremely breakable, the developers are attempting to give players a god-like feeling.

However, boss fights were not the only examples of 'theory' as a discussion point, and this was exemplified in the post by Anthony DiMento (Lead Player Investment Designer, 2018) in the explanation of the three pillars of the game (combat, the father/son relationship and narrative, and exploration). DiMento described how each of these

conceptual bases was broken down into the game itself with an emphasis on the side content being part of exploring the game world but not meant to feel like a chore to the player. This was expressed through DiMento stating their job was, "to design the quests that would help entice the player into participating in these optional activities," in keeping with Burgun's (2012) description of how to design open-world games. From this theoretical perspective, DiMento is understanding side quests and exploration as an added element of the game that players should be encouraged to participate in but that they cannot be forced into or be time consuming without a proper payoff in terms of a reward (e.g. armor, loot, weapons upgrade, etc.).

In the posts that discussed enhancements and added features with newer hardware, the authors discussed the capabilities of the game for its release on PC as well as in-game features that the PS4 console generation made possible. For the PS4, the exemplars of an explanation of in-game elements that the hardware made possible were the Sigrun boss fight (a side boss that is part of the post game content) (Yeh, 2019) and the design of the boat in the game (the primary form of transportation for players) (Rymer, 2018). In the explanation of how Sigrun's design pushed the PS4 hardware to its limit, Danny Yeh explained that the combat team gave Sigrun as large of a moveset as possible with, "...over 25 attacks, in addition to many combo chains and variations." (2019). Yeh also said, "We had to trim down her movelist a bit to fit her into the game's limit for an AI character (due to exceeding the PS4's RAM)," emphasizing how this design feature was made possible by the hardware capabilities and that the developers were taking full advantage of the console's capacity. In broader terms, Yeh is saying that,

as a PlayStation exclusive, the game engine had to take into account the limits for the

specific PS4 hardware (8 GB of RAM at 176 GB/s) to avoid loading issues (Nenad,

2018). Since the game's mechanical inputs did not rely on stamina bars for characters to

use animations, having a boss character with over 50 attack combinations that could

begin at any time on top of responsive animations (like movement and damage reactions)

while running at 1080p and 30fps pushed the system to its processing capacity.

Another key example of this element was the post by Dean Rymer (Senior

Combat Designer) who was tasked with designing the boat for the game. Rymer

explained that the boat presented unique problems for the team, "One of the challenges of

a canoe-style single-paddle boat was just how many animations it required. Anytime the

left stick was moved, the boat moved, and Kratos with it. This meant turns, moving

forward, moving backward, and rotating in place all required individual animations"

(2018). However, it was not just motion in the boat that was an issue but getting into it:

> The most challenging feature of the boat was getting in and out of it. It was a
>
> complicated problem to solve. So long as the player is facing the boat and the
>
> interact prompt is available, they can enter it. Because of our close camera, we
>
> always want to ensure a high level of visual fidelity and we can't hide anything.
>
> We also didn't want to snap or "pop" the player into a position to enter the boat.
>
> We wanted a smooth and seamless transition into the boat, regardless of the
>
> player's entry speed or angle (Rymer, 2018).

This resulted in the team having to build over 600 animations for the boat, according to

Rymer, to make it work properly. Including this information about the amount of detail

that the team put into one aspect of the game furthers the discursive frame of the game as innovative by describing how much attention was paid to a single part of the game's design. It also exemplifies the design ideology forwarded by Kumari et al. (2018) in terms of making the game feel seamless to maintain immersion. Additionally, due to the newer PS4 controller's haptic capability, the team added a unique light feature that only activates when the player uses the boat (turning the white light on the controller to a light aqua blue). As such, this post exemplifies discussions of how the team utilized the enhancements made possible by the newer console hardware.

The developers also discussed enhancements that were made possible by bringing the game to PC, which enabled them to add features that the more powerful processing and system specifications could handle. There were two posts that focused on the adaptations that the team made for the PC, both authored by Grace Orlady (Lead Community Manager). Orlady explicitly stated that "Our primary goal when bringing *God of War* to PC was to highlight the exceptional content the team created and leverage the powerful hardware that the platform offers to create a uniquely breathtaking and high-performance version of the game" (2021). This description of the use of hardware enhancements is an exemplary instance of framing the game's design as innovative by Orlady pointing to its integration into a PC format. As a PS4 console exclusive, porting the game to PC would require several design adaptations and Orlady would go on to describe specific elements that the game would have on PC. These would include:

> ...true 4K resolution, on supported devices, and unlocked framerates...;...a wide
>
> range of graphical presets and options so you can fine-tune your visual experience

based on your setup;...full integration with NVIDIA Deep Learning Super

Sampling (DLSS) available on RTX;...21:9 ultra-widescreen support," (Orlady,

2021; 2022).

By listing off each of these features and explaining their inclusion for the PC version of

the game, Orlady's posts accentuate the features that the developers were able to add due

to PC features. In terms of how some of these features enhanced the game, NVIDIA

DLSS integration allowed PC players to manually alter the color depth and ray tracing of

the game to a very high level (introducing color palettes or depth of definition in

impressions in the environment to a level not possible with the console hardware). 21:9

ultra-widescreen support meant that the PC port of the game would have a truly wider

field of view compared to the console version (much more peripheral space included on

the screen).

The theme of innovative design elements across the posts demonstrates that part

of SIE's use of their blog is to showcase the work that their developers do as well as

position the importance of innovation in design to their developers. The authors of these

posts do this through the thematic threads of combat design, the application of game

design theory, and taking advantage of hardware enhancements. As a strategy of

franchise management, this discursive frame seeks to elaborate on the value and attention

to detail that is part of franchise installments.

Highlighting Quality

The theme of highlighting quality was encapsulated within two subthemes:

cinematic experience (five posts) and storytelling (eight posts) and this discursive theme

was presented in 13 of the 27 posts (48%) For the authors, this theme included heavy allusions to film industry concepts by explaining the 'scene' of the game, the camera work, and the narrative of the game itself as a social commentary and so on. This theme was directed towards describing the game and its place as a part of the larger entertainment media landscape.

The posts that exemplified the point of cinematic experience involved explorations of the details in design and animations, the camera and lighting work, and offering demonstrations of the talent of the artists involved (actors, the soundtrack composer, and visual artists). Examples of explaining details in design and animations include the post by Tim Turi (Content Communications Manager) on the impact of combat in *God of War*. For example, one of the developers Turi interviewed stated that what made the combat feel special was that it,

> is forceful, kinetic, and bombastic. It is about giving players the opportunity to live out a clear power fantasy that feels rewarding and powerful. Lots of attention is paid to hit reactions and impact kinetics, and Kratos' axe becomes a natural extension of the player's hands. Animation responses and input handling ensure that every action feels rewarding in itself – and combined, they lead to combat sequences that would rival those of Hollywood blockbusters,

emphasizing the nuance that the game can make a player feel beyond just animation itself (2022). By making the comparison to Hollywood blockbusters, Turi is also employing a discursive frame of associating the game with movies as a way of pointing to the game as an artistic achievement. Using that phrase specifically and stating that the combat

sequences could "rival" Hollywood productions serves as an attempt to not only distinguish the game within the video game industry, but across media production in general. Furthermore, the level of visual detail that was included in the game was discussed as well with Yeh's explanation of the first Baldur fight and the environment as players being able to see it destroyed by being able to, "use Baldur as a training dummy and enjoy the spectacle of knocking him through trees and rocks," and players being able to see the effects in vivid, high resolution detail (like a modern movie) (2018). By calling attention to the flick-sync aspects of the game, Yeh is attempting to demonstrate how the advantages of third-person games can increase the resulting visual quality and experience for players as discussed by Black (2017).

Discussions of the camera and lighting work were present in multiple posts, but was especially salient in the post by Dori Arazi (Director of Photography, 2018). Arazi discussed three scenes that, "...helped define the new visual cinematic style we utilized for *God of War*." These three scenes included examples of how the game's no cut camera worked as well as how involved the lighting was as a part of the scenes. For the mother's knife scene (where Atreus will burn his hand by accidentally leaving the knife his mother gave him as a gift on her funeral pyre), that occurs in the first 10 minutes of the game, Arazi said,

> I decided to use the blue, cold, harsh tones of the "outside" to represent Kratos,
> Kratos as a father (at least at that point in the story) and the dangerous journey
> they have ahead of them. We used this light in sharp, high contrast for
> punctuation. We then chose the soft warmth of the indoors to define the rare

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safety the mother provided, using that to portray the softer emotions. The

challenge was staging the acting and camera to play against these two moods and

to help define the core relationships and personalities, all without cutting the

camera.

Arazi then went on to explain in detail how the scene unfolds with each unique frame

shot as a descriptor concluding with,

As Atreus comes back into frame, bow in hand, asking "what's next?", Kratos is

out of focus. As Kratos responds, instead of shifting the focus back to him, we

keep the focus on Atreus. Kratos speaks out of focus, lit by the warm light of the

pyre, with a thousand-yard stare. He is not present. He is outwardly functional,

giving Atreus commands, but his mind is elsewhere, mourning his dead wife. I

felt it gave this moment that extra, subtle tension it needed.

This level of detail in the description of the lighting and camera work offers insight into

how SIE attempts to associate a film-like quality with their game. This furthers the

discursive strategy of describing the game in cinematic terms as part of its value as a

product. As a tactic of franchise marketing, by comparing the game to a more

connotatively 'artistic' media form, Arazi is emphasizing the quality of the game's design

to create more distinction and value for the franchise by presenting the game as a

playable, film-like experience (Fleury & Mamber, 2019).

Demonstrations of artist talent were included throughout the posts with several

including at least some brief praise of the artists involved. However, there were five posts

that were specifically dedicated to examples of artist work from location design, musical

42

composition, model design, and the motion capture actors themselves. In one of these posts, Aaron Kaufman (Senior Community Strategist, 2019) offered examples of concept art by SIE artists that worked on the franchise since its inception. Among these examples was a picture of the first Kratos concept by Charlie Wen (drawn on a napkin) who said,

> After going through several iterations of the main character, I was having a bit more clarity of who Kratos was, and came prepared for a lunch/design session — armed with multiple pens, even a brush pen. Then, as ideas started to flow, I realized I had no sketchbook — good thing the restaurant had napkins. A vision of Kratos came to me that needed to get out of my head and onto paper (or napkin) — he had wide double blades attached to his forearms by chains that he would fling around. The napkins soon filled with Kratos flying through the air with double blades (Kaufman, 2019).

This specific example is noteworthy because it's inclusion of a low budget and simple example of concept art indicates a discursive frame of ascribing a sense of resourcefulness to the artist more than a piece of digital art would. In discursive terms, this quote and the example of the napkin art serve to show how far the franchise has come since that point as well as offer an example of the 'vision' of the artists involved in the franchise's development. Furthermore, the framing of this example of concept art encapsulates an emotional appeal to the telos of the reader.

The post by John Wie (Santa Monica Studio Community Manager, 2018) specifically focuses on art from the 2018 God of War game and intentionally showcases artist talent with Wie writing that,

Making games is a creative journey, from writing to design… from production to

QA, and we at Santa Monica Studio are excited to celebrate the art department

and to share a glimpse of this process with all of you. Our artists have posted

hundreds of images that showcase the immense talent and imagination put into the

project, so we hope you enjoy!

The post goes on to describe different character models and locations in the game with

the artist behind each piece offering their insight into how they were created. Wie's

framing of the images as being produced by artists with "immense talent and

imagination" serves as a larger franchise framing tactic. This is because Wie seems to be

trying to describe the games in the franchise as the product of the work of talented artists

as a further establishment of the quality of the franchise as a whole.

There were two posts about the score of the game; one from Bear McCreary

(Composer, 2018) and the other from Peter Scaturro (Sr. Music Producer, 2018).

McCreary discussed key musical themes for different characters in the game and what the

music was intended to convey. For example, in his description of Kratos's theme,

McCreary said,

Kratos' strength and masculinity are musically represented by assertive brass,

pounding percussion and deep male vocals. After all, Kratos is still the same

character from the classic games, retaining all that rage and power, simmering

beneath his aged, stern exterior. In this new iteration, Kratos, has matured

considerably. He is older, wiser and vulnerable. To communicate this other side

of his character, I included harmonic and melodic components that are beautiful,

even soaring. This approach explores the deeper layers to Kratos that the new

game present.

Communicating deeper meaning through music was also the main point that Scaturro

emphasized, with his post focusing entirely on how the music producers used music to

'speak' for Faye (Kratos's wife, a character who dies before the game begins). Scaturro's

explanation of Faye's theme and the artist 'voicing' her is a prime example of this,

> Eivør's unique vocal stylings are heard throughout the game, reminding us that
>
> Faye is ever present, guiding the way for Kratos and Atreus. The version of
>
> "Memories of Mother" on the official soundtrack is a special piece that takes
>
> advantage of Eivør's amazing range. From the subtle humming of the first
>
> statement of the theme to the soaring high notes over the choir in the closing
>
> statement, her voice draws you in.

Both of these posts use 'critic' language to describe the game's soundtrack and once

again point to a discursive framing of the quality of the game. In particular, by offering

in-depth accounts of the score's creation, these posts present another art form that is a

part of the game to further its distinction as an all-around artistic achievement. As an

illustration of the overall franchising strategy, these posts frame the musical components

of the game as a part of its quality in entirety (Fleury & Mamber, 2019).

The fifth example post by Scott Rohde (Game Development Head of Worldwide

Studios, 2019) announces a documentary about the making of *God of War* (2018), called

Raising Kratos. The post previews the documentary and collectively discusses the work

of all of the artists and actors involved in the game, saying,

The ultimate goal was to go beyond a 'making of' piece and dig deeper into the experiences of those who spend relentless time and effort into making something great. All creative endeavors, especially those of this magnitude, require an incredible amount of dedication and focus that constantly toe the fine line that separates both success and failure.

This post illustrates an effort to put the products and talent of the development team on display through an additional paratext on the game's creation. It also furthers the subtheme of showcasing artist talent by indicating that the documentary will explain how the team produced "something great." In the context of the broader theme of highlighting quality, this post also continued to establish a discursive representation of the game as a quality product and an artistic achievement by discussing the "dedication and focus" that are needed to attain "success" for SIE.

The second category of the theme of highlighting 'quality' is storytelling and that was encapsulated in the posts that discussed the driving points of the game's narrative with an emphasis on the father/son relationship between the two main characters, Kratos and Atreus. There were three posts that especially illustrated this category and described how the dynamic between Kratos and Atreus drives the main story of the game. In his post on how the team made the relationship work from a gameplay and story perspective, Sid Shuman (Senior Director, 2018a) shared some insights from the game's lead, Cory Barlog, and wrote,

Enter Atreus, Kratos's son and in-game companion. Atreus is the mirror that shines on Kratos that makes him realize that he needs to change…. Atreus will

pull the humanity out. Kratos will be shown his own humanity, and he'll figure

out how to embrace it," and went on to say, "'There's this fantastic arc that they

go on that's paralleling so many of our own lives,' Barlog teased. 'Our own

relationships with our children, or our parents. It's so universal.'

This framing of the game's narrative as being able to speak to real world social

relationships serves to build a sense of artistic value for the game. This frame of

discourse would be repeated by Aaron Kaufman's Father's Day post about the game by

saying,

At its heart, this is a story of a father and his son on an incredible adventure and a

deeply personal quest together. Therein lies a connection for all of us between

their story and the ones all of us have shared with our fathers, or for anyone who

is a parent to a child, (2018a).

These posts embodied the subtheme of quality by describing the game through its

narrative terms and specifically grounding that discourse in the context of real-world

parent-child relationships. Here, the developers are engaging in franchise promotion

through emotional appeals to their audience, by focusing on what they claim the game's

plot can speak to from a "universal" perspective. As a key component of franchise

maintenance, character portrayals and representations have a significant influence on the

success of the franchise as a whole (Thomas, 2021). As such, the developers use these

posts to target the relatability of the game's main characters to further the franchise and

this game in particular as a quality product.

In a post from later in 2018, Shuman would go on to further emphasize how this narrative pattern was a form of 'quality' by writing that,

Against all odds, the connection between this unlikely pair deepens and matures over the course of their epic quest. They grow and learn from each other. And, layer by layer, they gradually shed the psychological armor they've both built up. Until, by the time the game ends, they've become a true family. *God of War*'s story is remarkably deep and personal. Material of this caliber is rarely explored in the interactive medium, and the execution here is virtually flawless. *God of War* is one of the best games of the year, and the generation.

Shuman's emphasis on the game's depiction of the mental and emotional complications that are a part of "a true family" again points to the quality of the game that the developers are trying to establish through these posts. However, by going on to describe how the game's narrative is "virtually flawless" and forwarding the argument that the game is an exemplary piece of media across formats (by describing the "caliber" of the game's "material"), Shuman is framing the game's quality in a manner to further the franchise as a whole (Fleury & Mamber, 2019). As such, it is evident from this categorization that framing the game's narrative as an execution of great art is important for SIE and illustrates the storytelling component of highlighting 'quality.'

Showing Appreciation

The third theme of the blog posts for SIE was that of showing appreciation and included "thank you's" to both development team members and fans of the game through both written words and announcing fan requested features. This theme of appreciation

was woven throughout the majority of the posts; however, there were a few posts specifically dedicated to showing appreciation (7 out of 27, 26%). For showing appreciation to the fans (five posts), exemplary posts would either explicitly thank them or announce a new product or feature that fans had requested from the team, like new game plus or phone backgrounds. The posts that were appreciative of the team focused on thanking them for their hard work and were released at key moments of the development process.

There were four posts that offered prime examples of showing appreciation to the players with two specifically focused on fan requested features (photo mode and new game plus) and two that explicitly are about thanking players for their investment in the game. Jeet Shroff (Engineering Lead, 2018) posted about the release of photo mode (a feature that lets players pose characters and do in-game photography). Shroff opens the post by stating, "The last couple of weeks have been an exciting and humbling ride for us and we'd like to thank everyone for your love, support and for playing!" and goes on to explain photo mode, "With Photo Mode, players will be able to unleash their creativity and experience the world, its fast paced combat, the beautifully crafted environments and its deadly characters like never before," before closing the post with, "On behalf of all of us here at Santa Monica Studio, thank you for playing!" As such, Shroff's post seeks to position this feature (as well as the release of some free phone background stickers) as a way for the development team to thank players. As a franchising strategy, the inclusion of fans as co-editors (Deuze, 2007) and specific engagement directed to fans serve to further the overall financial goals of the franchise. This is because while the developers'

expressions of appreciation to fans may possibly be genuine, it also serves as a way of conceptualizing their fandom and seeking to exploit them by persuading them to buy the game (Stanfill, 2019).

This would be repeated by Aaron Kaufman (2018b) regarding new game plus by saying, Since the launch of the game, from every social media and forum corner in this realm, the single most requested enhancement has been to add New Game+. It's with our greatest pleasure to create this in honor of you – our fans," indicating that this feature was being presented as a means of thanking players. The forwarding of New Game+ (a game mode that allows players to restart the main story after beating the game with all of their gear and upgrades from their previous playthrough) as a means of thanking fans for their involvement in the game's financial success once again serves franchise ends by managing fandom and engaging the fans as a consumer community (Stanfill, 2019).

There were two additional posts that were written as "thank you" letters to the fans on the first and second anniversaries of the game's release. The first post was authored by Shannon Studstill (Head of Studio, 2019) and was titled: "*God of War*, One Year Later: Santa Monica Studio Thanks the Fans". In the post, Studstill expresses appreciation to the fans and the SIE worldwide team for all of their involvement in the game as well as for the Game of Year award. Studstill concludes the post by writing to the fans, saying, "Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for embracing the new *God of War* and for helping Santa Monica Studio rise up to a new beginning as well. From our whole team to you, that has meant everything to us. Now, we have a long journey ahead." This sentiment would be repeated for the second anniversary of the game by Jeff

Ketcham (Producer - Studio Marketing, PR and Community, 2020) by opening the post with, "Two years ago today, you, the fans of God of War, embraced change by joining Kratos and his son Atreus on their epic journey. Since then, all of us at Santa Monica Studio have continued to be astounded by your passion, creativity and support." Ketcham's post included examples of fan art and photos that had been shared with the studio as well as the release of some collector's items for purchase further establishing the strategy of franchise management through showing appreciation by both recognizing fan contributions to the franchise (Deuze, 2007) and managing the fandom (Stanfill, 2019) for the larger goals of the franchise. Ketcham, like Studstill, concluded the post with an emotional appeal to fans by saying, "Thank you again for being the best fans ever! You continue to be at the heart of everything we do here at Santa Monica Studio. Until next time, stay safe and remember to enjoy the journey." These 'letters' to fans were intended to show appreciation and seek to build a sense of community with players through discursive framing as a form of franchise management (Stanfill, 2019). For SIE, it seems that showing some recognition to build a fan community serves two ends: building rapport with the player base as well as directing them toward 'returning' consumer behaviors.

There were two posts that were written to specifically show appreciation to the development team, one by Cory Barlog (Creative Director, 2018) and the other by Curt Markwardt (QA Lead, 2018). Barlog's post commemorates the game going 'gold' meaning that SIE leadership have approved the final version of the game to be publicly released. Barlog, in writing to the development team, states,

> This was the scariest, most wonderful thing I have ever done and I can honestly say it would never have been possible without the full-throated support of Sony and the tireless work of the incredible team at Santa Monica Studio. We have been through a lot together and I would not change a thing. You are the best damn team a director could ever hope for and I am thankful beyond words for every ounce of passion and pride you put into this game.

Barlog is actively using the post to demonstrate appreciation to the team, but the choice to do so on the blog is important because it makes the message publicly available and not circulated within the team alone. By doing this, the post shows appreciation for the hard work that the team has done on the game, but it also serves the larger function of the blog as a whole by being marketing material. In this specific instance, the discursive goal for this post would be for the fans to see the studio as a positive environment and community of creators (framing the franchise by framing the working environment where it was made) (Caldwell, 2008; Stanfill, 2019).

This franchising tactic is carried on in Markwardt's post which shows appreciation to the development team. Markwardt's post discusses how hard and lengthy the process of making a modern video game is and includes a 'blooper reel' of the team's favorite bugs that they encountered while testing the game. This is explained by Markwardt writing,

> By title's end, not only did we have an extremely clean game, but also a plethora of hilarious bugs; each one a (sometimes painful) memory of the colossal effort the studio put into ensuring that you were able to fully experience our game

without distraction. Midgard Mishaps is not only a small collection of some of the

more entertaining pre-release bugs we came across, but it also serves as a

testament to the monumental efforts every single teammate made to ensure that

God of War was an enjoyable experience for each and every player.

As such, Markwardt's post demonstrates appreciation for the team's work as well as

offers specific examples of challenges that they had to overcome while making the game.

In a similar fashion to the post by Barlog, using a public blog to send this message to

show appreciation for the work the team has done serves two ends. It both allows for

Markwardt to thank the team and also to present that appreciation to a larger audience for

the purposes of framing the franchise and marketing it to players as a product that was

made in a positive environment.

Xbox Game Studios

Xbox Game Studios' blog covered a collection of topics focused on a range of

product promotions. The posts were written by nine different authors; however, of the 22

posts, half were written by two authors with Dana Sissons (Director of Communications)

contributing five and Jerry Chu (Director of Licensing) writing six. This is important to

note because of the limited scope of topics that were covered in the blogs, indicating that

for XGS, the blog space is very targeted in terms of content. The posts also are broadly

written as much more traditional marketing materials with attention to adjacent products

over the main franchise installments. To this point, during data collection, a number of

posts were not included as they were featured as posts but did not include any actual

content other than advertisements. As such, XGS appears to utilize these blogs in a

targeted market capital context which is why the coding of the posts revealed that to be the primary overarching theme with two themes that encompass it: (1) encouraging paratextual engagement and (2) enhancement features.

Encouraging Paratextual Engagement

Of the posts that focused on encouraging engagement through various paratexts (17 out of 22; 77%), there were two main categories of paratexts that were emphasized: game tie-in products (13 posts) and Esports (four posts). Posts that were coded into this theme focused on promotion of tangential products to the games themselves. The five different products that were discussed were multiplayer game cosmetics (digital products available in other games like character skins), collectible figurines, books (both narrative tie-ins and behind-the-scenes exploration), a clothing line, and a card game. Mike Nelson (Xbox Wire Editor, 2022) wrote an exemplary post on the *Gears of War* game cosmetics that were available in other multiplayer games. Nelson announced that Kait Diaz and Marcus Fenix (franchise leads) character models and skins (cosmetic and appearance features for the playable character the player uses) would be made available for purchase in both *Fall Guys* and *Fortnite* in the post,

> It's time for Marcus Fenix [a main character and the original franchise lead
>
> voiced by John DiMaggio] and *Gears of War* franchise favorites Kait Diaz [a
>
> main character in the fourth and fifth installments] and General RAAM [the
>
> villain of the first game and a fan favorite] to proudly take their place among the
>
> Bean Horde [a pun reference to *Gears of War* in the context of *Fall Guys*, a
>
> popular online multiplayer platformer game where the characters are called

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Beans]...In addition, Marcus Fenix and Kait Diaz will be returning to the *Fortnite*

Battle Royale Island [a popular online multiplayer third-person shooter game] this

week alongside more items from the Delta One Set [a set of *Fortnite* exclusive

cosmetic features from *Gears of War*].

This announcement is directed to *Gears of War* fans who also play these two popular

online multiplayer games and encourages them to purchase *Gears of War* content

available in those games as an additional form of engagement with the franchise. As a

form of franchise management, this discursive approach is pointing fans of the *Gears of

War* franchise to buy licensed products in other games as a way to play other games with

a *Gears of War* filter (Santo, 2019). In addition, financial engagement is a more direct

end goal for the fans this post is targeted to (Stanfill, 2019).

There were two different types of collectible figurines that posts discussed (Funko

Pops and action figures). Dana Sissons (Director of Communications, 2019; 2020) wrote

the posts describing the action figures that were made for collectors with two separate

announcements with two figures for each post. The post from 2019 announced the release

of Marcus Fenix and Augustus Cole figures (both popular characters) and described them

by stating,

Our partners at Storm Collectibles paid particular attention to capturing authentic

likenesses and sculpting for these action figures. Each figure features

interchangeable heads with "Classic" and "*Gears 5*" versions of Marcus and Cole

along with a full array of accessories (actually, the most accessories ever

produced for a Gears of War action figure). Complementing these details and

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accessories is a figure design with over 30 points of articulated joints – allowing

for a broad range of dynamic poses.

The 2020 post discussed the release of two figures that were franchise antagonists, the Drone and the Warden. Like the previous announcement, this post described the figures in a similar fashion directed to collectors, "We loved working with our partners at Storm Collectibles, and are happy to show off how these highly detailed 1:12 scale premium format action figures feature over 30 points of articulation and a full array of accessories like weapons, armor pieces and more." Both of these posts are targeted to *Gears of War* merchandise collectors and once again are encouraging fans to participate in paratextual engagement with the franchise. In keeping with the posts on digital products, these posts are once again presenting paratextual merchandise with direct consumerism as a form of fan engagement with the franchise.

For the Funko Pop! posts, Jerry Chu (Director of Licensing, 2019) wrote an announcement post and stated, "The next wave of *Gears of War* Funko Pop! figures are about to hit store shelves this Thursday, May 23! As we announced earlier this month, the mainline collection includes Kait Diaz in her winter gear from last year's *Gears 5* trailer, Marcus Fenix in his classic gear, Queen Myrrah, the Locust Boomer and the GameStop exclusive Skorge." This post served to not only call attention to the figurines, but also to the partnership with GameStop for the exclusive figure as a site of paratextual engagement (meaning that if collectors wanted the Skorge figure, they would have to buy from GameStop to get it). In this specific context, the partnership with GameStop is important because it is not only encouraging fans to buy more products but directing

them to a specific retailer to buy them if they want the partner exclusive merchandise. As Santo (2019) described, the emphasis on this partnership is furthering the management of the franchise as GameStop becomes a site of franchise management that is tied into the larger franchising goals. As such, in this post, XGS is not only encouraging fans to engage in more consumer behavior but also directing them on how to go about it (Stanfill, 2019).

There were several books that were discussed throughout the blog with both franchise narrative texts and making of books being promoted. All of the exemplar posts about the books were written by Jerry Chu (Director of Licensing). In particular, Chu wrote two posts in 2019 about the *Gears of War* Comic-Con panel in San Diego with the authors of the most recently published books. In the first post, Chu stated, "With *Gears Pop!* (a mobile game) and *Gears 5* releasing this year, join the developers and minds behind the *Gears of War* Universe as they discuss the past, present, and future of this storied franchise...this panel will give fans new insight into what's to come from one of the biggest sagas in gaming." The second post served as a follow up to the panel by saying, "This weekend at San Diego Comic-Con, *Gears of War* fans got a deep look to the game's lore. It all began with *Gears of War*: Extended Universe panel which featuring developers behind the games, books, novels, and comics of the much beloved *Gears* universe." The specific attention to and promotion of a Comic-Con event is noteworthy as it demonstrates Hanna's (2019) finding that Comic-Con has evolved to be a space that is now used for marketing of popular culture franchises and products more so than a fan convention. Furthermore, this description of the panel is important because it

demonstrates a desire for fans to engage with the franchise's additional content and incorporates a rich example of Gray's (2010) construction of the 'text' as defined by everything surrounding the main text for XGS. By calling the books part of the *Gears of War* universe, Chu shows that for XGS, *Gears of War* as a text (and a product line) goes beyond the games alone. In addition, this also offers a more coherent rhetorical example of how XGS wants to encourage fans to interact with the franchise with consumption of additional products being a staple component of that 'ideal' engagement.

The final two products that were laid out within the posts were a clothing line (announced in a post by Chu in 2019) and a card game (posted by Sissons in 2020). The clothing line was created to be part of XGS's E3 platform according to Chu,

> As we get ready to return to the Microsoft Theater in downtown Los Angeles to celebrate the future of gaming with the Xbox E3 2019 Briefing, we're excited to announce today that Xbox will welcome global streetwear brand AAPE by *A Bathing Ape for their debut of a capsule collection inspired by the *Gears of War* player community.

Once again, product promotion and purchasing ends are tied into the game franchise and in this case framed as a celebratory occurrence. Discursively, in this post, XGS is encouraging fans to "celebrate" with them and links that celebratory expression to a clothing line. This is yet another example of not only encouraging fans to engage with the franchise through purchasing other products but directing them as to what and how to do so.

The card game announcement post by Sissons in 2020 delineates more paratextual engagement, especially for fans who were traveling to a *Gears of War* Esports event by stating, "Those attending the Major can get an exclusive preview of the brand-new *Gears of War* card game ahead of its official release as well." In this instance, access to a product is being used to incentivize attendance and represents another aspect of encouraging paratextual engagement. For this post in particular, there are multiple layers of paratextual promotion going on as it promotes an Esports event and a card game in tandem with each other. As a discursive frame, XGS is delineating the experience as an "exclusive" opportunity to not only promote attendance but frame that attendance for fans of the franchise for their financial exploitation (Stanfill, 2019).

The second category of paratextual engagement was the promotion of *Gears* Esports and these posts would discuss upcoming events and the season schedule as well as outcomes of tournaments. As a growing form of international competition, Esports are organized competitions wherein professional teams play video games against each other and the competitions are often financially backed by business entities other than the company that produced the game (Reitman et al., 2020). In the context of *Gears of War* Esports, Microsoft, XGS's parent company, backed the competitions and hosted several international events before the competition ended in 2020. There were four posts specifically focused on Esports and three were written by Dana Sissons and one was authored by Rose Gunson (Esports Creative Program Manager, 2019). The first of the two exemplar posts that were selected was the post by Gunson and it explained the plans

for the 2019-2020 season and encouraged amateur players to join the online qualification

tournaments by saying,

> The top teams from every region – North America, Central America, Europe,
>
> Asia Pacific and, now, South America – will also be awarded with travel coverage
>
> to major international events, where they'll have the opportunity to play for
>
> massive prize pools against the top teams in the game. Throughout the season, top
>
> amateur teams will also have the opportunity to break into the Pro League via
>
> online qualification, while the lowest ranking Pro League teams from each
>
> division will be forced to fight for their spots.

This post incentivizes players of the game that are highly skilled to attempt to play

professionally as well as offers traditional fans another way to interact with the game.

Later in 2019, Sissons wrote another post promoting the 2019-2020 season with the

release of the schedule and repeated the incentives for players to compete by stating,

> The 2019-2020 season will be the biggest offering in *Gears of War* esports
>
> history. We've added a Pro League, new regions (South America and Asia
>
> Pacific) and increased travel prizing, giving more opportunities for eligible
>
> players of all skill levels the ability to compete for more than $2 million worth of
>
> prizing.

By indicating that competition was open to all players, this post also encourages players

to engage with the game beyond the standard game itself by playing the competitive

version of it. *Enhancement Features*

The secondary theme of enhancement features (5 out of 22; 23%) focused on discussing the capabilities of the current console generation that the game utilized and additional multiplayer content and system updates. The category of console capabilities consisted of descriptions of how the new games, *Gears 5* and *Gears Tactics*, used the console features to enhance the player experience. There were two posts that exemplified this category, one by Tyler Bielman (Publishing Design Director, 2020) and the other by Mike Nelson (2019). The post that Bielman wrote explained how *Gears Tactics* was going to be launched on the Xbox consoles after its release on PC and how the version for the newer consoles had received upgrades. This was delineated by Bielman saying,

> Enjoy an unparalleled console experience with *Gears Tactics* Optimized for Xbox Series X|S, running at 60 FPS and 4K UHD on Xbox Series X. Smart Delivery will ensure you have the best available version of *Gears Tactics* for your Xbox console, with faster load times and Variable Rate Shading on Xbox Series X|S.

Nelson's post described how *Gears 5* was receiving a console specific update for the Xbox One X,

> With *Gears 5* for Xbox One X, we have taken an uncompromising approach by optimizing the game so that all modes run at 4K and 60 fps. The Xbox One X multiplayer modes also enables higher quality SSR (Screen Space Reflections) and higher quality SSAO (Screen Space Ambient Occlusion) over the baseline Xbox One S.

For both of these posts, descriptions of the enhancements indicate a desire for XGS to incentivize fans to purchase the new games and the new consoles that were released in

2020. In terms of the hardware specifications described, all of them increase the visual

fidelity and resolution of the games to make the visual details in the games highly refined

(more in-depth color palettes, ray tracing, and environmental depth). As a franchising

strategy, this post is appealing to fans that would be interested in playing a version of the

games with higher fidelity and identifies hardware components that are all created to

improve visual effects and graphics.

The category of additional multiplayer content and updates shared how the

development team added new features to online multiplayer. There was one exemplary

post that was written by Dana Sissons and it announced the launch of new multiplayer

characters and maps as well as a skill-based play system. Sissons wrote,

Operation 4 also marks the return of beloved characters Dom, Paduk, and the

sinister Karn as part of the biggest character drop yet in *Gears 5*. That list doesn't

stop there though, as we'll be adding an additional three characters too. And

maps? Yeah, we've got more of those, too. But that's not all. Starting today,

we're rolling out some major updates. We've added an all-new ranked system, an

updated in-game store and streamlined earning with Gears Coins, our new

earnable currency.

Sissons's post is promoting new features added to the multiplayer system with new

characters, maps, and a ranked mode (a more competitive version of the multiplayer

content where players are assigned to lobbies based on their skill rank) and describing

those new features as enhancements. However, the description of the in-game store and

currency additions relate to the previous theme of paratextual engagement, with the

exception here being that XGS's goal is for players to spend more money in the game itself rather than its paratexts (Stanfill, 2019).

Comparative Analysis

Following the individual analyses of the blogs for both SIE and XGS, a comparative analysis of their themes was conducted to examine how these competing companies use their blogs for franchise management in both similar and different fashions through an examination of the differences in their discursive themes. From a broad perspective, the primary function of these blogs is to serve the companies as a marketing paratext for their respective franchises. However, the discursive franchising strategies that they engage in to achieve those ends are very different.

For SIE, the blog posts serve to create a perspective of the franchise and its installments as an artistic and innovative achievement with community involvement. This is demonstrated through their focus on the different qualitative aspects of the *God of War* franchise and the breadth of topics and representatives of the development teams that were included in the posts. This is not to say that they do not promote any additional merchandise or products, but any product that had to be purchased was not the singular focus of any of their posts. SIE's discourse is much more focused on creating and associating the notion of 'quality' to their franchise and follows a similar pattern to what is seen in the film industry (Caldwell, 2008). The blog included instances of referencing the film industry and Hollywood blockbusters in particular to further this end, indicating that SIE may desire for their franchise to be seen as a popular culture icon that is competing in the broader entertainment media landscape and not just the video game

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industry alone. In addition, the explanation of the methodology behind the franchise's development indicates a desire to craft a more conceptually defined image, similar to the practices described by Caldwell's (2014) description of the shadow academy. This was exemplified by the posts that included discussions and viewpoints that have been mirrored in scholarship on game design theory, expressing the franchise as being developed through theoretical foundations. As such, SIE is using these blogs to communicate and create a vision of their games as works of art as a broader franchise marketing and management strategy.

In contrast, while XGS also uses its blog for marketing its franchise, the posts are almost entirely focused on explicit product purchasing outcomes. As previously mentioned, some of their blog posts were simply product advertising stylized as posts and every one of their posts included links to purchases for products. In addition, many of their posts focused on products beyond the games themselves and strongly demonstrated a desire for fans and players to engage with the franchise through several avenues beyond the games, all of which involved buying a product of some kind. The blog included very little framing of the franchise itself and instead seemed to be engaging their franchise management through perimeter components and merchandise. There were a couple of posts in the enhancements theme that did discuss franchise installments, but those games were being framed in the context of purchasable hardware upgrades rather than the hardware upgrades themselves being an aspect of the franchise's games. As a critical examination of the larger franchising conceptualizations by XGS, the company uses the blog to frame the franchise as a product line with merchandise being just as important to

the franchise's establishment as the main text and games. The blog also included

discussions of product partnerships that incorporated retail spaces as part of the

franchise's maintenance (Santo, 2019) furthering perimeter merchandising as part of the

marketing strategy that the blog forwards.

In a direct comparison of the different themes in the blogs, there were some

similarities in the discussion of hardware capabilities and added game features for both

SIE and XGS. Both blogs included content on the hardware capabilities that the console

or PC systems offered and new features that were added to the games. However, the

discursive framing of those enhancements was different as SIE presented added features

as a form of appreciation to fans and the PC enhancements in terms of how the game was

adapted to the PC hardware. XGS's added game features introduced new in-game

purchases and the hardware enhancement discourse seemed to market the hardware more

than the games that were being discussed. Beyond those similar topics, XGS's blog was

much more directed overall in terms of its language and targeted outcomes with financial

ends being the repeated point. The fact that the blog also featured a narrower range of

authors (nine) in comparison to SIE (18) offers another example of that targeted focus

across the two discursive themes that were identified. While SIE's blog is also marketing

material, the three identified themes presented the franchise by elaborating on the

creation of the franchise's installments as well as engaging the fan community. These

differences are noteworthy to examine because of the competitive nature of these

franchises. The finding that the companies use the blogs in such a contrasting manner

was unexpected as the franchises that the posts discussed are in direct competition with

each other as the leading IPs for both of the companies. This may be explained by the different discursive conceptualizations of their franchises that are demonstrated through the separate themes that the coding identified.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

In terms of the limited scope of this thesis, there are a few conditions that need to be addressed. Firstly, this thesis focuses on the paratexts of only two companies in the context of one IP for each company. Despite the fact that both of these companies are part of the Big Three of gaming (IGN, 2015), examining only their leading IPs means that the discursive logics explored here may not apply across their entire array of video game franchises and franchising strategies. Furthermore, the initial version of this thesis was narrowed down to focus on the company blogs alone, when it originally included examination of additional franchise paratexts: documentaries and developer testimonial and design books. The removal of these paratexts aided in the depth of analysis for the blog paratext but narrowed the frame of reference for the totality of franchising initiatives for these companies in the context of *God of War* and *Gears of War*.

For future scholarship into the video game industry and franchising, researchers should consider comparisons of the franchising tactics of each of the Big Three companies (Nintendo, SIE, and XGS) and their leading IPs as managed through their blogs. This could be done by gathering a sample of their blogs that include posts across their entire IP lines rather than on their leading IPs alone. In addition, scholarship could consider more paratexts that are included in the franchising initiatives, both narrative tie-ins and press kits.

Another area that future research should consider is that of video game adaptations for television series and movies as all three of the Big Three companies have

this franchising expansion initiative in action with SIE's *The Last of Us* airing on HBO, Nintendo's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* releasing in theaters this year, XGS's *Halo* on Paramount+, and television adaptations of both *Gears of War* and *God of War* in the works for streaming companies among several other IPs for each of these companies. Specifically, this research could consider the ways in which these video game adaptations serve to manage the franchises they are attached to as well as the logics behind investment into the adaptations.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the strategies used by Sony Interactive Entertainment and Xbox Game Studios to market the game franchises through their blog paratexts were examined. By using this approach, this thesis was able to explore aspects of the differentiated franchise management strategies of two of the largest video game IPs in existence. Specifically, this was done through the lens of posts that focused on the leading IPs and directly competing franchises of these companies, *God of War* for SIE and *Gears of War* for XGS. This study was built upon and extended the work of media industry studies and game studies through the framework that was used with a basis of paratexts (Gray, 2010) of media franchises (Johnson, 2013) as its foundation to understand the ways that these companies engage in franchise management. These analyses yielded the findings that while both companies use the blogs for marketing purposes, SIE uses its blog to generate artistic and community value to manage its franchise while XGS uses its blog for primarily consumer ends alone. Furthermore, this research combined the work of game studies and media industry studies for a more holistic understanding of those initiatives.

In order to understand how SIE and XGS were utilizing their blog paratexts, a discourse analysis of their blogs was conducted and revealed different franchising discourse for both companies. This was followed by a comparative analysis that examined the different discursive strategies that the companies engaged in alongside each other with their contrasting emphasis on vectors of value. While these findings were not anticipated due to the competitive nature of the franchises in question, it is noteworthy

that their use of the blog paratexts varied as much as it did due to the franchises being in direct competition. This may be attributed to their larger parent company values differing (Sony for SIE and Microsoft for XGS). Sony as a company is much more invested in entertainment and media distribution than Microsoft which is primarily focused on manufacturing of hardware and software which may explain how their video game divisions can have such different approaches to franchise management.

In closing, this thesis was able to explain how company blogs provide some degree of insight into the management logics of these video game franchises and apply a more underutilized framework that combined the scholarship of both media industry and video game industry studies. This enabled an in-depth exploration of the discursive franchising strategies that these game developers use in order to manage their franchises as well as engage with and market to their audiences and fan communities. This offered insight into how the franchises are conceptualized and communicated as a whole, whether that be as a product line (XGS) or a work of art (SIE). Being able to examine competing franchises also furthers understanding of the inner workings of the gaming industry, despite the limited scope of these two, due to the prominence of these franchises. It is the continued building of this understanding that is imperative to persist in exploring, because as the video game industry continues to evolve and hardware advancements continue, media franchising logics will be adapted in step with those advancements.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Blog Post Sample

Source	Notes/Coding	Date	Author(s)	Title	Hyperlink
Playstation	innovation in design; positive in game feedback for players; importance of time and resource managment; a unique experience for players; quality camera work	10/4/2022	Tim Turi (he/him)	Game developers explain what makes God of War (	https://blog.playstation.com/2022/10/04/game-developers-explain-wl
Playstation	theatrical features; guide to play (tips) for better experience	1/13/2022	Grace Orlady	God of War on PC: Gameplay tips for tomorrow's la	https://blog.playstation.com/2022/01/13/god-of-war-on-pc-gameplay-
Playstation	unique experience; PC capabilities; cinematic style, camera views; tech compatibility to enhance experience	10/20/2021	Grace Orlady	God of War (2018) is coming to PC	https://blog.playstation.com/2021/10/20/god-of-war-2018-is-coming-f
Playstation	in-game paratext-Atreus's journal; thank you to fans as key to studio success	4/20/2020	Jeff Ketcham	Two Years with God of War	https://blog.playstation.com/2020/04/20/two-years-with-god-of-war/
Playstation	art as a central franchise component; bringing the world to life; creating emotion through personal connections	12/19/2019	Aaron Kaufman	Santa Monica Studio Celebrates 20 Years with Con	https://blog.playstation.com/2019/12/19/santa-monica-studio-celebra
Playstation	documentary about rebooting franchise-Raising Kratos; importance of showing the people behind the game; collaborative effort to create greatness	4/20/2019	Scott Rohde	Announcing Raising Kratos, a God of War Documer	https://blog.playstation.com/2019/04/20/announcing-raising-kratos-a
Playstation	challenges in franchise rebooting; 'transformative' storytelling; celebrating the franchise and one year anniversary; thank you for awards; promise to keep creating life reflective art and powerfull stories	4/14/2019	Shannon Studstill	God of War, One Year Later: Santa Monica Studio T	https://blog.playstation.com/2019/04/14/god-of-war-one-year-later-sa
Playstation	boss fight theory; spectacle experience vs combat experience; relationship of trust in game design; combat as a learning experience	2/1/2019	Denny Yeh	How Santa Monica Studio Created God of War's Gr	https://blog.playstation.com/2019/02/01/how-santa-monica-studio-cr
Playstation	commentary on dysfunctional family as a driving factor; exemplar of what a great game is; personal connections	12/28/2018	Sid Shuman (he/h	Editors' Choice 2018: Why God of War is One of 20	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/12/28/editors-choice-2018-why-go
Playstation	using music to bring the world to life; music as a storytelling factor	12/18/2018	Peter Scaturro	Memories of Mother: How the Music of God of War	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/12/18/memories-of-mother-how-th
Playstation	pillars of design: combat, father/son, exploration; role of and importance of side content as contributing to experience, not taking away	12/5/2018	Anthony DiMento	How Santa Monica Studio Nailed Exploration in Go	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/12/05/how-santa-monica-studios-n
Playstation	give me god of war mode-high difficulty; tips to help players with the experience; testing skills and patience	5/16/2018	Mihir Sheth	16 Tips to Conquer the "Give Me God of War" Diffic	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/05/16-tips-to-conquer-the-give-
Playstation	difficulty in designing the game for the intended experience; showing bugs as part of the creation process; appreciation for effort of the team	10/23/2018	Curt Markwardt	Midgard Mishaps: Insights From God of War's QA T	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/10/23/midgard-mishaps-insights-fr
Playstation	cinematic approach to pivotal story moments; lighting of scenes for narrative impact; art of motion capture filming	9/28/2018	Dori Arazi	The Art of the Scene: Cinematic Challenges in God	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/09/28/the-art-of-the-scene-cinemal
Playstation	designing the boat as a vehicle; making animations realistic; team effort to build a key game component	8/23/2018	Dean Rymer	God of War Development Diary: Building a Better B	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/08/23/god-of-war-development-diar
Playstation	new game plus experience; added features to enhance gameplay; incentive for players to replay the game	8/20/2018	Mihir Sheth	God of War New Game Plus Live Today, Top Reasc	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/08/20/god-of-war-new-game-plus-li
Playstation	new path for the franchise with boss fight; boss phases as part of the story; importance of the team's work to build the Baldur fight	8/16/2018	Denny Yeh	Fighting a God: Behind the Scenes of God of War's	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/08/16/fighting-a-god-behind-the-sce
Playstation	introducing new game plus as an experience; size of the update; unique experience with new resources/gear	8/8/2018	Aaron Kaufman	God of War: New Game+ Launches August 20	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/08/08/god-of-war-new-game-launch
Playstation	changing Kratos with the family hook; personal connection to parent/child relationships; Atreus as a compliment, not a disadvantage	3/23/2018	Sid Shuman (he/h	Kratos and Atreus: It's All in the Family	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/03/23/kratos-and-atreus-its-all-in-th
Playstation	showcasing artist talent; player engagement through photo mode; collaboration to make art feel grounded and immersive	6/22/2018	John Wie	Celebrating the Art of God of War	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/06/22/celebrating-the-art-of-god-of-
Playstation	the game's connection to real world parent/child challenges; developers share personal stories to connect to in game moments	6/17/2018	Aaron Kaufman	God of War: A Father's Day Tribute	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/06/17/god-of-war-a-fathers-day-tribi
Playstation	new game plus as a fan requested feature; increased difficulty as an appeal to players	6/11/2018	Aaron Kaufman	First Details: New Game+ Mode in God of War	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/06/11/first-details-new-game-mode-
Playstation	player creativity with photo mode; players as artists; photne stickers and player thanks	5/9/2018	Jeet Shroff	Photo Mode Comes to God of War Today	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/05/09/photo-mode-comes-to-god-of
Playstation	music as a part of the story; importance of important characters/moments having differently toned themes to convey narrative beats	5/8/2018	Bear McCreary	The Themes of God of War	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/05/08/the-themes-of-god-of-war/
Playstation	the emotional journey of Kratos as the driving story lead; importance of giving players what they deserve and pay for	4/16/2018	Sid Shuman (he/h	God of War: The Evolution of Kratos	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/04/16/god-of-war-the-evolution-of-k
Playstation	the game as demonstration of developer talents; desire to further the franchise with character development; inclusion of personal connections in the story	3/23/2018	Sid Shuman (he/h	Q&A: Cory Barlog Talks God of War Origins	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/03/23/qa-cory-barlog-talks-god-of-w
Playstation	achievement of going gold; effort and hard work of the team; thank you from the director; personal family story connections	3/22/2018	Cory Barlog	God of War Has Gone Gold, A Message From Cory	https://blog.playstation.com/2018/03/22/god-of-war-has-gone-gold-a-r
Xbox	Fall Guys crossover; three feature characters; paratextual product marketing	12/8/2022	Mike Nelson	Fall Guys x Gears of War Crossover Debuts Tonigh	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2022/12/08/fall-guys-x-gears-of-war-cros
Xbox	Pledging revenue to suicide prevention efforts; story tie ins to mental health struggles	9/9/2022	Mike Crump	Gears of War Pledges 1% of Net Revenue for Suici	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2022/09/09/gears-of-war-pledges-net-re
Xbox	Gears 5 Esports; card game and in game cosmetics; incentivizing attendance	3/6/2020	Dana Sissons	Gears 5 Esports Mexico City Major Kicks Off Today	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/03/06/gears-5-esports-mexico-city
Xbox	new action figures; promotion of upcoming and previously released games; additional collector paratexts	2/21/2020	Dana Sissons	Gears of War Unveils New Action Figures at New Y	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/02/21/gears-of-war-unveils-new-a(
Xbox	narrative paratext and design book; tie-in to new game; encouraging more engagement through products	12/13/2019	Titan Books	Titan Books Announce New Gears of War Compani	https://titanbooks.com/blog/titan-books-announce-new-gears-of-war-c
Xbox	Gears 5 Esports season details; encouraging play through additional competition; promotion of the game	9/3/2019	Dana Sissons	Gears of War Unveils Future of Gears Esports	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/09/13/gears-of-war-unveils-future-
Xbox	game promotion and paratext promotion for Comic Con; panel of paratextual creators	7/22/2019	Jerry Chu	Gears of War Extended Universe Showcased at Sa	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/07/22/gears-of-war-extended-univ
Xbox	announcing Esports season; game promotion; paratextual and extended use of game	7/15/2019	Rose Gunson	Gears of War Announces Details for Next Season o	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/07/15/gears-of-war-announces-de
Xbox	Comic-Con panel announcement; book signing; incentivizing attendance	7/8/2019	Jerry Chu	All the Details for Gears of War at San Diego Comic	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/07/08/all-the-details-for-gears-of-w
Xbox	clothing line; game and partnership promotion	6/7/2019	Jerry Chu	AAPE by *A Bathing Ape and Xbox to Drop Gears (	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/06/07/aape-and-xbox-gears-of-wa
Xbox	retrospective book promotion; highlighting developer efforts; Gears 5 promotion	6/3/2019	Jerry Chu	Gears of War: Retrospective Now Available for Pre-	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/06/03/gears-of-war-retrospective-r
Xbox	Funko Pops; GameStop exclusivity; promoting mobile game	5/21/2019	Jerry Chu	Gears of War 2019 Funko Pop! Collection Available	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/05/21/gears-of-war-2019-funko-po
Xbox	narrative paratext promotion; emotional story; symmetry with the games	5/10/2019	Jerry Chu	Gears of War: Hivebusters First Issue Available Nov	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/05/10/gears-of-war-hivebusters-fir
Xbox	Gears of War 4 Esports finale; promoting Gears 5; describing season drama	4/23/2019	Dana Sissons	Gears of War Esports Pro Circuit to Wrap Up Seasc	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/04/23/gears-of-war-esports-pro-cir
Xbox	Exclusive Funko Pop; incentivizing GameStop partnership	3/20/2019	Cameron Deuel	Gears of War Exclusive Funko Pop! Revealed at E(	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/03/20/new-gears-of-war-exclusive
Xbox	new paratexts; figures; comic tie-in, retrospective book; encouraging engagement	2/15/2019	Dana Sissons	Gears of War: New Line of Collectibles and Books t	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/02/15/gears-of-war-new-line-of-col
Xbox	comic book paratext promotion; including in game incentives; game and comic design and narrative symmetry	6/28/2018	Jerry Chu	Witness the Locust Ascension in the Gears of War:	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2018/06/28/gears-of-war-rise-of-raam/

Xbox	Gears Tactics promotion on console; controller paratext; additions to the game to ecncourage engagement	9/18/2020	Tyler Bielman	Gears Tactics Coming to Xbox Consoles November	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/09/18/gears-tactics-coming-to-xbo
Xbox	adding multiplayer content to Gears 5; new ranking system; encouraging players to participate in ranked play through in game currency	7/14/2020	Dana Sissons	Gears 5 – Operation 4: Brothers in Arms Available	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/07/14/gears-operation-4-brothers-i
Xbox	reviews of Gears Tactics; praising game design and story; promoting narrative tie-in book	4/28/2020	Will Tuttle	Gears Tactics is "Excellent," Now Available for PC	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/04/28/gears-tactics-is-excellent-no
Xbox	new Gears Tactics game trailer; new experience for players with turn based strategy; promoting book for story	4/13/2020	Dana Sissons	Gears Tactics Launch Trailer Debuts; Pre-Load Tod	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2020/04/13/gears-tactics-launch-trailer-
Xbox	design augmentations for Gears 5 on Xbox One X and PC; highlighting design features and capabilites; thanking developers for their work	9/16/2019	Mike Nelson	Inside Xbox One X Enhanced: Gears 5	https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/09/16/inside-xbox-one-x-enhanced

Figure A-1: Screenshots of the Sheets file of the sample and color coordinated coding.

Appendix B

Coding Scheme

Themes	Descriptions
SIE	
Innovative Design	▪ 7/27 posts, 26% ▪ Combat design o Player freedom in style o Skill scaling & adaptation ▪ Game theory o Applications of game design scholarship ▪ Added features o Explaining how hardware capabilities were considered
Highlighting Quality	▪ 13/27 posts, 48% ▪ Cinematic experience o Scene design o Artist talent ▪ Storytelling o Narrative points (father/son dynamics) o Social commentary
Showing Appreciation	▪ 7/27 posts, 26% o Thanking fans and members of the development team o Discussing additions as gifts to fans
XGS	
Encouraging Paratextual Engagement	▪ 17/22 posts, 77% ▪ Game tie-in products o Announcing digital content, figurines, books, card game, clothing line ▪ Esports o Event announcements, season updates
Enhancement Features	▪ 5/22 posts, 23%

	▪ Console hardware descriptions
	  ○ Graphic capabilities, refresh & frame rates
	▪ Multiplayer updates
	  ○ New content, online systems

Figure B-1: Table with breakdowns of the thematic coding of the posts.

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