PUBLIC RELATIONS CHALLENGES:
OPINION LEADERS AND VIDEO GAMES

by

Michele G. Zorrilla

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in the School of Communication

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Lynn M. Zoch

May 2013

_____   _____
Dr. Lynn M. Zoch   Date
Thesis Advisor

_____   _____
Dr. Kevin Bowers   Date
Committee Member

_____   _____
Dr. Scott Dunn   Date
Committee Member

PUBLIC RELATIONS CHALLENGES:
OPINION LEADERS AND VIDEO GAMES

by

Michele G. Zorrilla

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in the School of Communication

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Lynn M. Zoch

May 2013

_____   _____
Dr. Lynn M. Zoch   Date
Thesis Advisor

_____   _____
Dr. Kevin Bowers   Date
Committee Member

_____   _____
Dr. Scott Dunn   Date
Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This study identifies challenges faced by public relations professionals in the gaming industry when reaching out to their player audiences. The framework of diffusion of innovations theory and the role of opinion leaders provide a possible route to overcoming some of those challenges.

Video games are now a global form of education, entertainment, and sport. The video game industry has been growing in terms of the number of players, games, and genres. It is also changing in terms of electronic sports, mobile platforms and applications, and social media. To keep up with this growth and these changes, video game companies have begun to turn to public relations professionals to build and maintain relationships between them and their players. These public relations professionals are faced with shifting challenges based on their industry.

Diffusion of innovations has been chosen as the theoretical framework to provide a possible route to overcome these challenges because of the social nature of the theory and the social nature of video games. Diffusion of innovations is concerned with the adoption of an innovation through a social system (Rogers, 2003). Opinion leaders are key individuals who can influence others by initially adopting an innovation as well as showing others how they utilize an innovation. In the case of video games, opinion leaders are usually media outlets that provide news coverage. They are also individuals who introduce a game to other friends so that they may play together and/or individuals players turn to for opinions about the game they are playing. By identifying, recognizing, and utilizing opinion leaders, public relations professionals may overcome some of the challenges they face when reaching out to their player audiences.

To identify these challenges, 10 public relations professionals from both gaming studios and public relations firms that specialize in video games were interviewed. They identified three main challenges: time, knowledge and adaptability, and market saturation and standing out.

In order to provide recommendations to overcome some of these challenges, players from two existing video game communities were interviewed. They were asked questions regarding where they heard about games in general as well as their experiences and opinions regarding the particular game they play.

A list of six recommendations can be found in the Appendix of the study to help overcome some of the challenges faced by public relations professionals. Four focus on the challenges themselves, and two are aimed at identifying different types of opinion leaders.

Michele G. Zorrilla, M.S.
School of Communication, 2013
Radford University

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my fiancé, Jim. Without your support, I would have frustrated myself into knots. You were there to pick me up on the hard nights, and you took the time to help me work through both the little grammatical nitpicks and the onerous process of scanning every page. You provided insight no one else could. Thank you.

This thesis is also dedicated to my mother. Always the proud supporter, and always there to remind me of it, you cheered me on from across the house, down the coast, and across the country. The journey to the East Coast wouldn't have been the same without you, nor would have this thesis.

Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to my family. The love and support of my family has spanned distances and time zones. I'll be home to share everything with you when the wind blows.

<h1 style="text-align:center">TABLE OF CONTENTS</h1>

<div style="text-align:right">Page</div>

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Over the past 40 years, video games have grown into a global form of education, entertainment, and sport. This growth is evidenced not only in video games themselves, but in the video game industry and the public relations industry. Video game companies are now turning to public relations professionals to establish and maintain relationships between them and their players. However, the constant change and growth in the industry presents challenges in reaching player audiences. This study aims to identify some of those public relations challenges and provide a route to help overcome some of those challenges through the use of diffusion of innovations theory and the role of opinion leaders.

From arcades to consoles and computers to smartphones, there is a video game for almost every aspect of life. In the past, elementary students played *The Oregon Trail* when learning about the pioneers; today, *Sid Meier's Civilization III* is helping teach world history (Squire, 2011). The United States Army utilizes a number of games for training soldiers in negotiation, language and culture, and battlefield simulation (U.S. Army PEO STRI, 2012). While Bohemia Interactive's first-person-shooter, *Virtual Battlespace 2*, "is a cornerstone of Army and Marine training" (Peck, 2012, para. 4) in the United States, it is also used in Britain, Canada, Australia, and other NATO nations (Clark, 2012). According to the Entertainment Software Association (2012), in the average U.S. household, there is "…at least one dedicated game console, PC or smartphone" (p. 2). The association also found that the average game player is 30 years of age and has been playing games for 12 years. Video game sales in the United States and other countries, such as the UK and Germany, have either surpassed music and

movie sales or are currently competing for the top spot in the entertainment industry (Cheng, 2007; eTurboNews, 2011; BBC News, 2012).

The area of video games as electronic sports (eSports) is steadily growing, and these sports are played by professional gamers worldwide complete with media coverage, sponsors, and prize money (Magee, 2006). In 2011, the Major League Gaming competitive video game league garnered 3.5 million viewers alone (Lish, 2011). Riot Games, developer and publisher of *League of Legends*, hosted their Season 2 World Championship with a prize pool of $3 million in October 2012 (Goldfarb, 2012). The event was broadcast worldwide in at least 12 languages (Riot Games, 2012) and was viewed by more than 8.2 million unique viewers via online and TV combined, becoming "the most watched competitive gaming eSports event of all time" (Breslau, 2012, para. 2).

Professional gaming aside, *League of Legends* is one of many games out of many genres that cater to a wide array of players. This is evidenced by a recent Forbes article (Gaudiosi, 2012) listing the most-played games based on hours of accumulated play that includes a variety of genres. *League of Legends* is the world's most-played game, whose players "logged nearly 1.3 billion hours of gameplay" (Gaudiosi, 2012, para. 2) between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012. Following in second place with over 600 million hours played (not including Asia) is Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (Gaudiosi, 2012). In the United States alone, consumers spent $24.75 billion on video games in 2011 (Entertainment Software Association, 2012).

For many games today, it is important for developers to provide an immersive game experience, additional content, and maintenance of the game world in order to

maintain player populations and revenue, especially considering the constant release of new games. Game revenue is generated through different models, including sales, purchasable items, and subscriptions. Considering the number of players and the number of video games and genres available, game developers are constantly seeking information about their audiences in order to provide better gaming experiences.

To keep pace with the growing number of players and viewers, game studios have expanded their public relations departments. A small studio may employ a single professional while larger studios may have separate departments such as community relations, internal communications, and media relations. Studios may also employ public relations firms that specialize in gaming and technology. One of the goals of a public relations specialist in the industry is to seek feedback, both positive and negative, from players regarding a game. For example, a community relations specialist at a game studio will report this feedback to the game developers who may then decide to make adjustments. The community relations specialist then provides information on these changes back to the gaming community, continuing the feedback cycle.

The role of public relations is important in maintaining dialogue with a game's or company's community, especially with the changing market, media, and the rise of digital sales. Businesses will often develop a mobile application (app) that accompanies their brand, product, or services such as Blizzard Entertainment's Mobile Armory that provides access to *World of Warcraft*'s character profiles, guild chat, remote auction house, and other features.

In addition to the digital sales of mobile applications, many games are now available for download, cutting out a visit to a retail store. Digital downloads of games

surpassed the purchase of physical copies in 2010 (NPD Group, 2010, September 20). Following this trend, Digital Gamers, defined as gamers who play across consoles, PC, mobile, and portable platforms both online and offline and have a heavy focus on downloading games (digital acquisition) (NPD Group, 2011), are now competing with Core Gamers, those who spend the most time gaming out of all gamers across all systems with a heavy focus on consoles (NPD Group, 2011), "for amount of time spent gaming and number of games acquired" (NPD Group, 2011, June 27). In addition to the traditional console, PC, and portable device, gamers now have access to digital-only games such as mobile applications, download-only games for PC or console, and browser-based games (such as Facebook games or the browser-based massively multiplayer online-game *Gaia Online*).

With the increases in player populations and the number of games available also comes the increasing focus on social media as a communication tool. Each platform and genre may appeal to multiple audiences that are best reached in different ways. Social media is one tool that can be used across platforms, genres, and audiences, especially considering that, "as of August 2012, 69% of online adults use social networking sites" (Brenner, 2012, para. 3). These sites include Facebook, with 1 billion monthly active users, of which 600 million are mobile users (Protalinski, 2012); YouTube, with more than 800 million monthly users (Lawler, 2012); and Twitter, with more than 500 million users and 200 million monthly active users (Lunden, 2012; Fiegerman, 2012). With so many users and easy accessibility, many companies from a variety of industries are turning to social media to help build their brands and connect with their communities. The gaming industry is no different. Ultimately, it is a public relations professional's goal

to establish and maintain the relationship between a game company and its players across all channels and platforms, including social media, events such as conventions, and a game's website.

Purpose of the Study

Considering the various and continuing changes within the video game market, the challenges faced by public relations professionals in the video game industry have also shifted. The purpose of this study is to identify the public relations challenges faced in the video game industry today and recommend possible ways to overcome some of them. To help narrow the scope of this study, recommendations will focus on video games through the lens of diffusion of innovations theory. While diffusion of innovations has been used in studies in a variety of disciplines, such as sociology (Ratts, 2011), anthropology (Henrich, 2001), health (Edelstein, 2011), and marketing (Whelan, 2003), it is a communication theory that deals with a particular communication process: the transfer of new ideas (Rogers, 2003). The diffusion process is highly social in nature, involving social systems and an individual's personal networks.

Video games are also a social medium. According to the Entertainment Software Association, "62% of gamers play games with others, either in-person or online" (2012, p. 5). For example, boys have been found to use violent or sports games as social tools that allow for socialization through competition and cooperation (Olson, Kutner, & Warner 2008). Another example is massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMOs or MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), where thousands of players interact within the game world to advance their characters by banding together to bring

down monsters or other players. Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008) found that MMO players were motivated to play by achievement, immersion, and social reasons.

Often, players will introduce a game to their friends in person or through social media so that they can all play together. Those friends within someone's social network who influence them to pick up a new game are what diffusion of innovations would call opinion leaders. Despite the changes within the video game industry, the social factors of video games remain. Understanding the social factors of video games and the role of opinion leaders may provide a route to help overcome some of the challenges public relations professionals in the industry face today.

This study involves two series of interviews. The first series focuses on public relations professionals within the gaming industry in order to identify their current efforts and the challenges they face when reaching out to their player audiences. The second series focuses on players within two existing game communities in order to gauge their evaluation of public relations efforts. They were asked to discuss how they learn about new games, and new information about their favorite games, in order to identify whether they are being influenced by opinion leaders. Results of the second set of interviews were used to provide recommendations for the challenges identified in the first set of interviews.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Diffusion of innovations has been chosen as the theoretical basis for this study because both the process of diffusion and playing video games are highly social in nature. The process of diffusion identified by Rogers (2003) provides a framework to analyze how video games are first adopted and why they continue to be played after adoption. The diffusion and adoption of a new innovation (in this case, a video game) can spread through social systems (such as a neighborhood) and through an individual's personal network (such as a group of friends). As mentioned previously, players will share information about a game with their friends so that they can all play together. This is the process of diffusion at work, and players who influence their friends to play a new video game often play the role of opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are a key social component in spreading a new innovation (Rogers, 2003; Valente & Davis, 1999).

Diffusion of Innovations

Diffusion of innovations is concerned with the communication and adoption of a new idea. The classic model of diffusion of innovations involves "(1) the *innovation*, defined as an idea, practice or object perceived as new by an individual or other relevant unit of adoption, (2) which is *communicated* through certain *channels* (3) over *time* (4) among members of a *social system*" (Rogers, 1976, p. 292). Because of this newness as perceived by an individual, there is a level of uncertainty involved in diffusion; this uncertainty is reduced by gaining information about an innovation, after which an individual may choose to adopt or reject it (Rogers, 2003). Adoption generally follows an S-shaped curve (Rogers, 2003; Schleien & Miller, 2010), beginning with a small number of individuals until it hits critical mass, "defined as the point at which enough individuals

have adopted an innovation that further diffusion becomes self-sustaining" (Rogers, 2004, p. 19). As the innovation continues to be adopted, fewer individuals remain to adopt, resulting in a leveling-off of the curve (Rogers, 2003; Schleien & Miller, 2010). Adopters may be categorized by their innovativeness, or "the degree to which an individual or other unit of adoption is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than the other members of a system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 22). These categories are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003).

Adoption rates differ depending on the innovation. Innovations are evaluated on five perceived characteristics: 1) relative advantage, 2) compatibility, 3) complexity, 4) trialability, and 5) observability (Rogers, 2003). Different communication channels are more influential depending on the stage of adoption an individual is in and include mass media and interpersonal channels. Time is used in three ways during the diffusion process: 1) how long it takes an individual to go from knowledge to adoption or rejection, 2) how late or early the innovation is adopted, and 3) the adoption rate in a social system or "the number of members of the system who adopt the innovation in a given time period" (Rogers, 2003, p. 20). An individual's social system may affect their decision to adopt or reject, particularly system norms and opinion leaders (Rogers, 2003).

The innovation-decision process involves five stages: 1) knowledge or awareness of the innovation; 2) persuasion, when an individual forms a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the innovation; 3) the decision to adopt or reject the innovation; 4) implementation, using the innovation; and 5) confirmation, seeking reinforcement about the adoption decision (Rogers, 2003).

After diffusion of innovations debuted in 1962 (Rogers, 2004), research studies sought to expand and refine the model. Rogers' & Bhowmik's (1970) study focused on the concepts of homophily (the degree of similarity between pairs of individuals) and heterophily (the degree of dissimilarity between pairs of individuals) and their influence on relationships in the diffusion process. They offered seven propositions, focusing on the idea that communication is more effective when individuals are homophilous on relevant attributes but heterophilous on others. Communication that falls at either extreme of the homophily-heterophily balance is ineffective because either the individuals involved are so similar they have the exact same knowledge and beliefs, or they are so dissimilar that they have no common symbols or codes with which to communicate.

In the case of the current study, looking at gamers and the issues that public relations practitioners have in reaching them, public relations practitioners are focused primarily on the first and second stages of the innovation-decision process. Their goal for the first two stages is to establish a relationship with players. They will reach out to media outlets and interact directly with gamers in order to create awareness or provide knowledge of the game they want to be adopted. Additionally, they seek to aid in the persuasion stage by generating a favorable opinion of their games in media coverage and when interacting with players.

The role of system norms in diffusion was demonstrated by Rogers and Kincaid (1981), who looked at Korean villages and their adoption of family-planning and particular family-planning methods. Certain villages adopted the intrauterine device (IUD) while others adopted the contraceptive pill or vasectomies. While the Korean government had instituted a national family-planning program that promoted all methods,

the differences from village to village were due to the norms of each particular social system. As defined in Rogers (2003),

> *Norms* are the established behavior patterns for the members of a social system. Norms define the range of tolerable behavior and serve as a guide or standard for the behavior of members of a social system. The norms of a system tell individuals what behavior they are expected to perform. (p. 26)

In relation to the current study, system norms may play a role in determining what type or genre of game is adopted or not adopted. For example, a group of friends may play a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG), such as *World of Warcraft*, together. With new games being released, the group is more likely to play another MMORPG or a game with similar features together than they are a game from a vastly different genre, such as a first-person shooter (FPS) game.

In addition to system norms having an influence on adoption (or non-adoption), change agents and opinion leaders also play a role in diffusion. Though some studies consider opinion leaders and change agents as one and the same (see Summers' (1971) investigation into opinion leaders and innovativeness), it is generally considered that change agents focus on changing behavior (Thompson, Estabrooks, & Degner, 2006) rather than beliefs or opinions. They often play a role in diffusion studies in the medical field, such as Schleien & Miller's (2010) recommendations for five potential roles for change agents in increasing inclusive practices at recreational facilities. Common occupations for change agents are "teachers, consultants, public health workers, agricultural extension agents, development workers, and salespeople" (Rogers, 2003, p.

368). Change agents are generally different (or heterophilous) from those they seek to influence due to their increased knowledge and familiarity with an innovation; however, this knowledge also grants them competence credibility, "the degree to which a communication source or channel is perceived as knowledgeable and expert" (Rogers, 2003, p. 384-385). On the other hand, change agents may also employ paraprofessional aides who "are more homophilous with the lower-status members of the user system that they serve" (Rogers, 2003, p. 384) and are more likely to have safety credibility, "the degree to which a communication source or channel is perceived as trustworthy" (p. 385).

In the case of the current study, public relations professionals can be considered change agents, and the companies they represent can be considered change agencies. Their goal is to change player behavior by influencing them to play their game. While public relations professionals may interact directly with players, they also interact with opinion leaders who can influence other players. These opinion leaders are generally print and online media outlets, but they may also be specific players or individuals.

Two-step Flow Theory

The two-step flow of communication hypothesis was developed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) based on their study of the 1940 presidential election that looked at the role of media in the process of decision-making during the campaign. They had originally anticipated that the media directly influenced voting decisions. Instead, they found that personal influence within interpersonal relationships was more influential. Opinion leaders are a key component of the two-step flow of communication hypothesis, which states that "ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population" (Katz, 1957, p. 61).

11

Following the original 1940 voting study, Katz (1957) examined the findings of three subsequent studies focused on the impact of personal influence, the flow of personal influence, and the opinion leaders and the mass media. Regarding the impact of personal influence, the additional studies supported the original finding that personal contact is more influential than media, and that interpersonal influence was also attributed to the homogeneity of social group members (Katz, 1957). The flow of personal influence focused on the observation that opinion leaders were found at every societal level, they are likely to be influential in only one sphere (fashion, medicine, etc.), and that the ability of opinion leaders to be influential among a homogenous group was related to their personal values, knowledge/competence, and social connections inside and outside the group (Katz, 1957). The original finding that opinion leaders were more exposed to media than their followers was also supported (Katz, 1957).

Opinion Leaders

In the innovation-diffusion process, the mass media are helpful in the first step of gaining knowledge. From there, an individual moves on to the persuasion and decision stages where they seek specific information to evaluate the advantages or disadvantages for their particular situation (Rogers, 2003). This is where opinion leaders are sought out for subjective evaluations of the innovation. While opinion leaders are embedded within their social systems and thus are homophilous with other individuals in the system (compared to change agents who are more heterophilous outsiders), there are characteristics that help define why they are influential. Opinion leaders are more exposed to mass media (as found in Katz, 1957), have greater contact with change agents, have greater social participation, have higher socioeconomic status, and are more

innovative compared to their followers in the system (Rogers, 2003). It is also important to note that the innovativeness of opinion leaders depends on their system's norms: "When a social system's norms favor change, opinion leaders are more innovative, but when the system's norms do not favor change, opinion leaders are not especially innovative" (Rogers, 2003, p. 318).

Four methods have been used in studies to identify opinion leaders. Valente and Davis (1999) proposed the sociometric method, which focused on identifying opinion leaders by asking all members in a community to nominate those they sought out for information or advice. Opinion leaders are the individuals who received the most nominations (or sociometric choices), and "thus who are involved in the largest number of network links" (Rogers, 2003, p. 308). The second method focuses on asking key informants to identify opinion leaders in a system. This method was used in Buller et al. (2001) to identify and recruit opinion leaders to learn how to use computers and the Internet so they could teach others in the community. A third method is self-designation where individuals "select themselves to be peer leaders" as mentioned in Valente & Davis (1999, p. 58) or "indicate the degree to which others in the system regard them as influential" as described in Rogers (2003, p. 310). The fourth method is observation, "in which an investigator identifies and records the communication behavior in a system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 311). Observation to identify local opinion leaders was performed by bartenders in Kelly et al.'s (1991) study to reduce HIV risk behavior.

Opinion leaders have been used to promote or accelerate the diffusion of an innovation, such as the reduction of HIV risk behaviors among homosexuals as reported by Kelly et al. (1991). Opinion leaders were identified in Biloxi, Mississippi, and trained

in health promotion messages, conversational examples, and the basics of HIV infection, high-risk behavior, and risk reduction. Surveys were conducted three months and six months after the training period. Results included an approximate 30% decrease in unprotected anal intercourse in Biloxi compared to much less change in the control cities. Additionally, "there was an increase in proportion of all anal intercourse occasions when condoms were used only in the intervention city [Biloxi]" (Kelly et al., 1991, p. 170). There was also a decrease in men who reported having multiple sexual partners in Biloxi.

Preventive innovations aside, opinion leaders have also been used to promote diffusion in marketing studies. Tierney (2001) describes the efforts of Hasbro to market a new hand-held game by identifying and utilizing opinion leaders in their target market. In this marketing study those opinion leaders were termed "alpha pups," the coolest boys between the ages of 8 and 13 in Chicago. Alpha pups were identified by asking children the sociometric question, "Who is the coolest kid you know?" until they reached the end of the coolness hierarchy. After they were identified, the alpha pups were offered $30 to learn Hasbro's new video game, Pox. The new game had a key feature, "a radio transmitter enabling a player to battle any other player within 30 feet" (Tierney, 2001, para. 4). Each alpha pup was also provided with 10 Pox units to give to their friends as part of Hasbro's viral marketing plan for the game.

While opinion leaders have been used to promote diffusion, they have also played a role in studies of the failed diffusion of an innovation, such as Leonard-Barton (1985), Rogers' (2003) case illustration based on Wellin (1955), and Johnson & Kim (2009). One criticism of diffusion of innovations is its pro-innovation bias, "the implication…that an innovation should be diffused and adopted by all members of a social system, that it

should be diffused more rapidly, and that the innovation should be neither re-invented nor rejected" (Rogers, 2003, p. 106). This pro-innovation bias results in a failure to learn about all aspects of diffusion and has led researchers "to ignore the study of ignorance about innovations, to underemphasize the rejection or discontinuance of innovations, to overlook re-invention…, and to fail to study antidiffusion programs designed to prevent the spread of 'bad' innovations (crack cocaine or cigarettes, for example)" (Rogers, 2003, p. 107).

Zhu and He's (2002) study incorporates the ability to study discontinuance, addressing one aspect of the pro-innovation bias. In their study, Zhu and He (2002) examine the adoption and use of the Internet in China using three independent variables in the diffusion process: perceptions (perceived characteristics of the Internet or PCI), motivations (perceived need for the Internet or PNI), and social context (perceived popularity of the Internet or PPI). Their study also links diffusion of innovations with uses and gratifications by looking not only at adoption and discontinuance of the Internet, but also by looking at motivations for using (needs met by using) the Internet. Individuals were categorized into four groups: Continuous Adopters, Discontinuous Adopters, Potential Adopters, and Continuous Non-adopters. They found that the more an individual perceived the Internet as popular with his or her friends and family, or those in the same occupation, the more likely they were to adopt. Similarly, "the more beneficial, compatible, easy to use, and demonstratable to others the person considers the Internet," the more likely they are to adopt (Zhu & He, 2002, p. 489). Another interesting finding "is that the adoption and use of the Internet in China appear to be two distinct processes that are influenced by different forces. Internet adoption is primarily affected by PPI and

PCI, whereas Internet use is solely influenced by PNI" (Zhu & He, 2002, p. 489). They mention that "perceived social norms or perceived benefits may provide sufficient incentives for an audience to make the one-time investment but may not be enough for the audience to sustain constant usage unless there is a felt need." (Zhu & He, 2002, p. 489).

Linking back to the current study, it would make sense that the more popular a game is within an individual's social system, the more likely they are to begin playing the game (perceived popularity). Additionally, the perceived characteristics of a game will influence an individual to play. For example, playing a game may provide the benefit of increased popularity with friends. Games are generally able to be demonstrated and are often shared with friends by either playing the game in front of them or by playing the game with them.

Media and Diffusion

While recent studies such as Zhu and He (2002) have focused on diffusion of the Internet, other modern diffusion studies focus on media. Clement, Fabel, and Schmidt-Stoltin (2006) provide a literature review on the diffusion of hedonic goods and analyze the various models of diffusion. They mention that "hedonic and utilitarian goods or services can be differentiated on the basis of two key dimensions…: the attributes of the product or service itself and the pattern of demand for the product" (Clement et al., 2006, p. 156). Hedonic goods are considered "experience goods" that are difficult to judge before their use or consumption, such as movies, music, video games, performing arts, and books. By comparison, utilitarian goods, such as yogurt, are easier to compare before their consumption "on the basis of objective attributes (e.g. fat content, price, brand)"

(Clement et al., 2006, p. 156). Put another way, "utilitarian goods depend on functional and measurable attributes, whereas hedonic goods instead possess more intangible, symbolic, and aesthetic attributes" (Clement et al., 2006, p. 156). Hedonic goods also may be considered scarce seasonal products (such as during the Christmas season), have a high uncertainty and risk, and have shorter life cycles with rapidly declining sales patterns compared to utilitarian goods.

Clement et al. (2006) divide "the indicators that influence the demand and diffusion process of hedonic goods in the media industry…into three groups: (1) environment-specific factors, (2) adopter-specific factors, and (3) product-specific factors" (p. 158). They conclude with generalized influences on the diffusion process: 1) "promotional spending tends to have a major impact on the diffusion patterns of hedonic goods," 2) "potential customers often use critic reviews to help make their consumption decisions, which means these reviews influence the attitude of the demand peaks for movies and music," and 3) "specific categories of movies or music result in unique diffusion patterns" (Clement et al., 2006, p. 162). Regarding the third influence, they recommend "it may be helpful to select different diffusion models not only for different types of hedonic goods but also for different genres within a particular category" (Clement et al., 2006, p. 162). Though Clement et al. (2006) focus specifically on movies, music, and books, they mention their observations may apply to all hedonic goods that fit the stated parameters, including video games.

Byeng-Hee, Seung-Eun, and Byoung-Sun (2006) examined online games as an innovation and new medium through the uses and gratifications perspective and diffusion of innovations. They presented an integrated model of game adoption through seven

constructs: demographic profile, perceived needs, innovativeness, new media ownership, media use, perceived characteristics, and perceived popularity. Breaking adopters and non-adopters into subgroups, Byeng-Hee et al. (2006) categorize adopters of online games into "those users who have continued to play online games since their adoption (continuers), as well as those who at one time adopted, but have not continued to use, online games (discontinuers)" (p. 302) while non-adopters "include those who have never used [online games] before, but have expressed to try them in the near future (potentials), and those who are reluctant to play online games (resistors)" (p. 302-303).

Regarding adopters, findings included significant differences in regard to gender, video game use, and Internet use; men were more likely to be adopters, and adopters had higher level of video game use and Internet use. In addition, online games are often adopted to meet the need of passing time and perceived relative advantage (similar to Zhu & He's (2002) findings on Internet adoption). Between continuers and discontinuers, only gender and relative advantage were significant predictors. As for non-adopters (potentials and resistors), Byeng-Hee et al. (2006) found significant differences in the need for passing time along with relative advantage and complexity of using online games.

As a note, while Byeng-Hee et al.'s (2006) study addressed a gap in existing research by looking at online games as an innovation and new medium, the study was conducted in South Korea. While there are demographic and other similarities between South Korean college students surveyed in the study and college students in America, the study may need to be repeated in the United States to fully apply its results here.

The goal of public relations professionals in the gaming industry is to help the diffusion of a video game as an innovation by establishing and maintaining relationships with players. This leads to questions concerning public relations professionals as change agents and the player audiences they seek to reach. Considering that players will go to certain sources and opinion leaders for information concerning a game, and public relations professionals reach audiences through a variety of channels, it would make sense for public relations professionals to use the same channels that players do.

From this literature review, the following research questions were developed regarding public relations professionals:

RQ1) What are public relations professionals currently doing to reach their player audiences?

RQ2) What are the challenges that public relations professionals face in reaching their player audiences?

Building off of the questions asked of public relations professionals, the following questions regarding player audiences were developed:

RQ3) What channels do players use versus those that public relations professionals use?

RQ4) How successful do player audiences feel public relations efforts are?

RQ5) Are public relations professionals effectively utilizing the opinion leaders within those channels to reach player audiences?

CHAPTER 3 – PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS

Public relations professionals were interviewed in order to better understand the challenges they face when reaching out to their player audiences and the roles they play in the innovation-diffusion process. It is these challenges that this study aims to provide recommendations for.

Methods

The first series of interviews were with public relations professionals currently employed in the gaming industry. Interviews were chosen due to the exploratory nature of this study. With the evolving nature of the video game industry and the dearth of research regarding video games and public relations as well as video games and diffusion of innovations, this study seeks to help fill the gap. As Creswell (2003) mentions, a qualitative approach is merited "if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it" (p. 22). Qualitative research, such as interviews, "is useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine" (Creswell, 2003, p. 22). This study may help identify the variables that should be examined in future quantitative studies.

Additionally, interviews were chosen over surveys because surveys "require a comprehensive and current list of prospective respondents" (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 28), which this study did not have access to. Additionally, surveys require additional time and monetary resources that this researcher does not have. Interviews were chosen over focus groups for the same reasons outlined by Poindexter & McCombs (2000), "one-on-one depth interviews are conducted because it is impractical, unrealistic, or too expensive to bring opinion leaders or decision makers together as a group. Opinion

leaders may be scattered across the country, or even if they reside in the same city, their hectic schedules may be impossible to coordinate" (p. 268). Many of the public relations professionals interviewed were located on opposite coasts of the United States (or beyond), making the time difference and distance impractical for focus groups.

Confidentiality and privacy were also a concern; one-on-one interviews provide a setting where individuals may express sensitive information or opinions that they may not share in a focus group. Focus groups are more appropriate for gathering opinions while one-on-one interviews "are most beneficial as a research tool when the topic being explored involves change, novelty, or uniqueness and the people being interviewed play influential or unique roles" (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 269). Interview questions focused on the experiences of participants rather than their opinions, and public relations professionals play a part in influencing players to adopt their games, although at this point it is unclear how influential they truly are.

Without access to a database of public relations professionals in the gaming industry, participants were solicited through three channels: email, LinkedIn, and Facebook. First, three personal contacts in the gaming industry were solicited via email. Two contacts did not respond. One contact did respond and was provided with a solicitation email that she then forwarded to nine public relations professionals currently employed in the gaming industry for a snowball sample. Of the nine professionals solicited, six responded and were interviewed.

Second, a solicitation message was posted on two LinkedIn groups. One group was directed specifically at public relations professionals in the gaming industry and the second group was for a specific gaming company. From the first group, two participants

responded and were interviewed. From the second group, a public relations professional from the company responded to interview questions posted on the group's discussion board. Third, a personal contact at a game company was solicited via Facebook. This person responded and was interviewed.

A total of 10 public relations professionals related in some way to the gaming industry through their occupations were interviewed. Four participants were employed at public relations firms that specialize in gaming and work with game studios. One participant was employed at a public relations firm that specializes in gaming and worked with companies that develop middleware and tools used by gaming companies. Three participants were employed at large, well-known gaming studios. Two participants were employed at small, independent gaming studios. Overall, half of the participants worked for public relations firms that specialize in gaming and half worked for game studios. Six participants worked at larger public relations firms or studios and four participants worked at smaller, independent, or individually run firms or studios. Nine of the participants were located in the continental United States and one was located in Europe.

Interviews were conducted between September 2012 and December 2012 and lasted no more than thirty minutes. Participants were given the choice of being interviewed via Skype, telephone, or email. Skype and telephone were preferred by the researcher in order to provide immediate feedback, clarification, and follow-up questions. All interviews except for one were conducted over Skype or telephone; the last interview was conducted on a LinkedIn group's discussion board. Each participant was asked the same five questions. The first three questions focused on identifying a participant's game player audiences, goals for each audience, and current efforts to reach those audiences.

The last two questions focused on identifying overall challenges and the biggest

challenge faced when reaching their player audiences. These questions may be found in

Appendix B. The interviewer asked followed-up questions where necessary, and all

respondents agreed to be contacted again if the researcher had additional questions.

Findings

RQ1: What are public relations professionals currently doing to reach their player

audiences?

Because efforts to reach player audiences may depend on a game's intended

audiences and goals for those audiences, the first research question was broken into three

separate questions during the interviews.

Public relations professionals identify a game's audience in three ways: by

platform, by genre, and by type of gamer. Platforms are the hardware and software used

to play a game. Experience across all platforms was represented within the group of

participants: console (such as Xbox 360), personal computer (PC), handheld (such as the

Nintendo DS) and mobile (including tablets and mobile phones). A variety of genres was

also represented, including puzzle, first-person shooter (FPS), multiplayer online battle

arena (MOBA), action RPG (roleplaying game), and massively multiplayer online

(MMO) games.

The most common method used by the participants in defining a game's audience

was by the type of gamer: casual, mobile, hardcore, and midcore. While exact definitions

varied between participants, all agreed that their definitions were based on the amount of

time spent playing, the amount of effort required to understand the game, and the amount

of game-related news a player accessed. For example, casual gamers are more of a "pick

up and play" type of player. They spend the least amount of time playing and reading game-related news. Casual games are also easy to learn to play. For example, mobile games such as *Angry Birds* do not require extensive time commitments to progress and have controls that are easy to use.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are hardcore gamers: players who spend the most amount of time playing and the most amount of time accessing game-related news. Hardcore games are more complex and thus require a greater investment of time to learn to play. Falling in between casual and hardcore players are the core (or mid-core) players. They may play a hardcore game but not to the extent of a hardcore player, and they may not access as much game-related news.

Some games may be played at all levels: casually, (mid-)core, and hardcore. For example, a casual *World of Warcraft* player spends the least amount of time a week playing and engages in activities that do not require advanced game knowledge or skill. A hardcore *World of Warcraft* player spends the most time a week playing and takes part in most or all aspects of the game, which requires a heavy time commitment, advanced game knowledge, and a high level of skill with a chosen character. Hardcore players also spend time outside of the game looking up games news and updates and researching ways to improve their character. Mid-core players range somewhere in between. They commit more time to a game than a casual player and may take part in many or all aspects of a game, but not to the same degree or advanced level as a hardcore player.

One other distinction mentioned by participants was the type of publication a player would access for game-related news. For example, casual and mid-core players may not actively seek out game-related information, but may read it in a men's magazine

such as *Maxim*, while hardcore gamers will actively seek out game-related publications such as *PC Gamer* magazine.

The goal of public relations professionals at both public relations firms and game studios was generally to create awareness among their presumed audience to generate sales or downloads. As mentioned in Chapter 2, their goals focused on the first (knowledge) and second (persuasion) stages of the innovation-diffusion process. Other goals include player retention, which falls under the fifth stage of confirmation. For example, a participant who worked on long-running game franchise mentioned,

> The goal is always to outdo the year before; we want to grow year after year and get more and more casual people in the fold. [We want to] flip casual users into hardcore users and grow them as word-of-mouth advocates. If we can turn all these guys core, we can turn them into proponents [for the game].

One participant mentioned a different goal. Instead of focusing on creating awareness, his company's focus was on creating and improving the player experience for those currently playing the game. This is accomplished through the use of forums and other feedback tools. This goal also falls under the confirmation stage in the innovation-diffusion process.

Current efforts to reach player audiences were fairly uniform across all participants, though the amount of time dedicated to each effort varied based on a participant's organization. Participants who worked for public relations firms primarily focused on contacting print and online media outlets. Participants who worked at game

studios also contacted media outlets but focused on social media and game forums as well.

Social media was more of a focus for game studios than public relations firms due to the financial cost and time investment required. The main social media sources mentioned were Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. All three are platforms where contests and surveys are held. One participant mentioned Twitterviews, "A Twitterview is an interview with a [game] character via Twitter – it gives a chance to communicate who the character [from a game] is and to get a brand personality out. Days of profiles [for game characters] are gone; Twitter is the new channel."

Another frequently mentioned tactic is attending trade shows, such as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) and the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX), where public relations professionals may interact with players by providing them with promotional merchandise, early play opportunities for a game, and other activities. Trade shows are also used for meetings with media publications to promote new games or new game features.

RQ 2: What are the challenges that public relations professionals face in reaching their player audiences?

This question was broken into two parts during the interviews: the first to identify major challenges, and the second to identify what a participant considered the biggest challenge. No matter where a participant was employed or the size of their organization, participants all mentioned the same challenges to varying degrees.

Time. The first challenge is time. This includes the schedule of game industry events and the timing of game related efforts around these events, such as game

announcements and releases, and time being considered a commodity by players and journalists. For example, announcing and timing the release of a game can be a challenge if a trade show is happening around the same time because media outlets will be focused on publishing stories about the trade show during the following weeks. A similar situation is if a large game company is holding a press event the same day a public relations professional's company is releasing a game. For example, one participant relayed one of their experiences: "An interview was arranged during a major conference. The day of the interview happened to be the same day that a major company fired and re-hired their whole staff, resulting in a postponement of the interview." Seasonal timing can also be a challenge, particularly in December. It is difficult to get a media placement in December because many games released in October and November in time for holiday sales have already taken up those placements. Additionally, many journalists take time off around Thanksgiving and the last two weeks of December.

Another aspect of time is that it is a commodity, something in short supply for those they're trying to reach. Put succinctly by a participant: "People are progressively time starved. They have less time to read things and engage." This holds true for both journalists and players whose attention may be spread between multiple games at any given time. Many journalists receive hundreds of emails a day regarding new games, game updates, or other game news. Similarly, players are faced with new games being released every day and cannot read through every new game review or game description.

Knowledge and adaptability. The second challenge focuses on knowledge and adaptability. As one participant mentioned: "The key and challenge is to know the client, product, and marketplace. If you don't know a product and you're pitching it, your

27

chances of succeeding are reduced." Being aware of market trends, and timing and scheduling a game's events accordingly, falls in line with the first challenge of time. Additionally, public relations professionals are not on the development side of games; this means that they must be prepared for changes or delays in the rollout of a game and react accordingly. As mentioned previously, the game industry has changed greatly with the advent of social media and mobile gaming; this has required companies and public relations professionals to expand across platforms. One participant noted that media outlets are no longer influential in driving users to certain games:

> For example, a new Zynga game would not see a big release campaign
> like the launch of *World of Warcraft*. The audience for casual Zynga
> games is very limited. They are not influenced by reporters in early game;
> they play because friends play. Reporters won't write about it because the
> audience isn't looking for stories. The same goes with mobile or social,
> browser-based games. Adapting to this transition in the market is key.

Market saturation and standing out. The biggest challenge faced by all participants was market saturation and standing out from the crowd. Journalists receive hundreds of emails per day regarding new games. A number of participants also mentioned that, even if a game did gain the attention of a journalist, the quality of the game must speak for itself. Getting a game to stand out to players faces the same challenge, as described by one participant:

> For example, I can look to a friend of mine who is sort of a general games
> consumer. He knows exactly which games are aimed at him, but this can be 20
> games per week. I often hear him talk about a title, and when I check back with

him after a week, he never even bought it because there were ten other games he

bought which were in more or less the same genre.

In summary, three categories of challenges were identified by participants: time, knowledge and adaptation, and market saturation and standing out from the crowd. The next chapter addresses the research methods used to reach players and the findings from those interviews.

CHAPTER 4 – PLAYERS

In order to provide recommendations on how to overcome the challenges identified by public relations professionals in the gaming industry, player opinions and experiences were needed. Their positive or negative evaluation of public relations efforts is a determining factor in whether or not particular tactics or communication methods should be used.

Methods

The second series of interviews were with players from two existing game communities: Riot Games' *League of Legends* and Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*. These two communities were chosen due to their community size, longevity, and success with the hope that they would also provide models for successful public relations efforts. As noted earlier, as of July 2012 *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft* are the two most played PC games in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012). Interviews were again chosen due to the lack of access to a database of players that surveys would require and the exploratory nature of this study. Players of both games are also located around the globe, making it impractical to bring them together for focus groups. Interview questions focused on individual player experiences and opinions in regard to games in general, the particular games they played, and the communicative efforts of the particular games' companies.

Players were solicited via the General Discussion forum for each game. Four players from *World of Warcraft (WoW)* responded and were interviewed; one participant recruited a roommate who also played *WoW* for an interview. Five players from *League of Legends (LoL)* responded and were interviewed. Additionally, two personal contacts

that played both games were interviewed to provide a comparison between the two game communities. A total of 12 players were interviewed across both games. Additional participation requests were posted in the New Player Forum for *League of Legends* and the New Player Help and Guides forum for *World of Warcraft* in an effort to solicit specifically newer players. Unfortunately, both posts were found by the company to be a violation of the code of conduct for the particular forums and were quickly deleted.

Interviews were conducted between January 2013 and March 2013. Similar to the interviews with public relations professionals, player participants were given the choice of being interviewed via Skype, telephone, email, or their respective game's in-game chat. Email was the most anticipated choice, especially considering the anonymity of the game communities along with possible scheduling conflicts. Additionally, soliciting participants via game forums does not have the same sense of security or professionalism that LinkedIn or personal contacts provide. All five players from *WoW* were interviewed via email, three players from *LoL* were interviewed via in-game chat, and two players from *LoL* were interviewed via Skype. Both personal contacts were interviewed via Skype. All interviews via Skype were transcribed for analysis while email and in-game chat required no transcription. Each participant was asked the same questions: seven demographic questions, three questions regarding games in general, six regarding the particular game they played, and three regarding the particular game's company. These questions may be found in Appendix C.

Demographics

Demographic questions looked at how long players have been playing their particular game and the number of hours played per week along with age, sex, ethnicity,

location, and occupation. *League of Legends* players had a greater variety in their length of play, ranging from as little as six months to as long as four years, with most players having played between one and three years. Four *LoL* players spent 10 hours or fewer a week playing; one player spent between 10 and 20 hours; the last two played more than 20 hours a week. Two *World of Warcraft* players had been playing for five years, one player had been playing for seven years, and three players had been playing for eight years. Only one *WoW* player spent fewer than 10 hours a week playing; one player spent between 10 and 20 hours playing; the other five players spent 20 or more hours a week playing.

Players from both games were located in the continental United States with the exception of two players from *League of Legends*: one was from Chile and the other was from Canada. Eight players were Caucasian, one player identified only as Chilean, one player was Filipino, and two players were of mixed descent. Nine players were men, and three players were women. Five players were students; the remaining player occupations spanned various industries, including information technology, publishing, photography, and make-up artist.

Findings

RQ3: What [information] channels do players use versus those that public relations professionals use?

This question was broken down into two segments: the first segment focused on games in general, and the second segment focused on the player's particular game. Regarding games in general, players were asked where they sought game information. The two players who played both games used a variety of sources, including visiting

websites of companies whose franchises they followed, general game news sites like Polygon and Kotaku, Twitter, and friends. *League of Legends* players included in their list of channels friends, Google, and websites, with most players identifying friends or teachers as their favorite method of receiving information about games in general. *World of Warcraft* players were less inclined to seek out general game information and most focused on seeking information from *WoW*-related sites.

Following this question, players were asked if they ever posted on game forums or blogs. Only two players read or posted on forums other than those of their respective games. The majority of players read more than they post on forums; the times that they post are to seek information, to provide help to another player, or to share their opinion on a subject. Only two players posted frequently (at least once a day): one *League of Legends* player posts frequently in order to improve their player support talents as they ultimately aim to get hired by Riot Games, and one *World of Warcraft* player indicated that they found the forums entertaining to read between projects at work.

Questions regarding a player's particular game included where they first heard about the game, what made them decide to start playing, and where they seek both objective and subjective information about the game.

Almost all players from both communities first heard of their respective game from friends, both those they knew in real life and those they met online. Two *WoW* players mentioned they were fans of previous Warcraft games by Blizzard Entertainment and heard of *WoW* by keeping up with company news.

The most common reason players began playing was because a friend they knew in real life or online had asked them to play the game with them, and a couple of players

were given trial access to their respective game. The two *WoW* players who were fans of the *Warcraft* franchise began playing because of their love of the previous games. One *League of Legends* player did research on the game, and the deciding factor was a particular character based off a werewolf, which they were drawn to. One *World of Warcraft* player, who had been given a trial pass to the game, described their experience: "I remember looking up at the mountains in the Barrens [a particular area in the game] way in the distance and thinking 'I can actually go climb those mountains if I wanted.' It was an awe inspiring moment."

When seeking objective information about their game, such as game mechanics or upcoming changes, players from both game communities mentioned a specific blog (Surrender at 20 for *League of Legends* and MMO-Champion for *World of Warcraft*). The one exception was the *League of Legends* player whose goal was getting hired at Riot Games. Their activities on the *League of Legends* forum and in-game chat allowed them to interact with Riot employees for the majority of their information. While the two major blogs were the favorite method identified by players seeking objective game information, they also go to the forums, the social media presences of other blogs, and the public testing versions of their respective game (known as the Public Beta Environment for *League of Legends* and the Public Test Realm for *World of Warcraft*).

Players were asked where they first heard about a particular blog as a follow-up question via in-game chat or email after the initial interview. Five players responded. One player mentioned it had been so long they did not remember, while the other four all heard of them through word of mouth (on the forums, in Skype with friends, or in-game chat).

When seeking subjective information about their game, such as opinions about upcoming changes, almost all players discuss game changes with their friends or fellow players, either in-game or on the forums. Often, they will read objective game information to form an initial opinion, then read (and sometimes participate in) forum discussions or chat with other players in-game for additional opinions. One player who plays both games stated that he will decide for himself without seeking opinions on the forums or chatting in game and instead turn to professional players in tournaments (for *League of Legends*) or "US and world leaders in progression" for *World of Warcraft*. Progression in *WoW* is based on defeating boss monsters in raid dungeons with a group of 10 or 25 players. Progression guilds are among the first in the world or region to defeat all the bosses in a raid and are comprised of elite hardcore players.

Public relations professionals communication channels vs. player communication channels. In the previous series of interviews, public relations professionals mentioned that they focus their efforts primarily on the channels of print and online media outlets (particularly those working at public relations firms) and social media (more of a focus for those at game studios). These efforts would be most successful with the two players who played both games, particularly because they were the only two to mention general game news sites (online media outlets) as one of the channels they use for general game information. Only one of the two players mentioned they also use Twitter for general game news.

Focusing public relations efforts on the channels of print and online media and social media may be moderately successful with *League of Legends* players since they mentioned using Google and websites for general game news. However, respondents did

not specify that they followed any websites in particular. *World of Warcraft* players seemed less inclined to seek general game information and so would not be effectively reached through the channels public relations professionals are currently using.

Public relations professionals also mentioned blogs as a part of the social media channel. All players except one mentioned that they use blogs; however, they only mentioned blogs in regard to news and opinions about their particular game rather than games in general. Based on this small sample, it would seem that blogs are better suited to providing information to current players, who are in the confirmation stage of the innovation-decision process.

One channel that was mentioned briefly by both public relations professionals and some players were conventions, such as Blizzcon and PAX East. These events are limited in the number of players they can reach due to being physical events that may be geographically or financially out of players' reach. Only four of the players mentioned conventions. One *LoL* player said that conventions and major events look like "it's more fun and games than it is a meaningful interaction about the game itself," and that the forums are the place they see Riot Games interacting most meaningfully with players.

The other three players who mentioned conventions all had positive feelings towards them. One player who played both games had never physically attended Blizzcon (Blizzard Entertainment's convention) but used to purchase virtual tickets where players could watch the event online. From their virtual experience, they felt Blizzard did a "pretty good job with panels….They take a lot of questions, more so than some panels from other games that I've seen."

The other player who played both games had personally attended PAX East in Boston last year (2012), where Riot Games was featuring *League of Legends*. He shared his experience and also compared Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment:

What Riot does do at things like PAX: they'll interact with players, they'll shoot the breeze with you. You know, they'll talk, they'll laugh. They act like regular people. I mean, they're wearing a Riot costume or regalia, but they do stuff like Riot Pub Crawl: hang out with the Rioters and drink and talk and whatever, if you're old enough. Can't say I could ever see Ghostcrawler [Lead Systems Designer for Blizzard Entertainment] doing that, or Chris Metzen [Senior Vice President of Story and Franchise Development for Blizzard Entertainment] – "Hey, come have drinks with Thrall [a character Metzen voices in *WoW*]!" – as funny as that would be.

While conventions may not be effective at reaching larger numbers of players, they seem to be an effective channel for creating positive feelings toward a game and a company, which is also briefly mentioned at the end of RQ4. Additional discussion regarding this question and the channels used by players may be found in the discussion section.

RQ4: How successful do player audiences feel public relations efforts are?

To answer this question, players were asked about their experiences with and feelings about Riot Games or Blizzard Entertainment in terms of information dissemination and communicative interaction. Players were also asked to identify where they personally saw information that was clearly from their game's company and where

they had seen or experienced interaction between their game's company and themselves or other players.

Players from both communities felt that their respective game companies were doing a "pretty good" or "decent" job. *League of Legends* players cited the frequency of communication and the variety of channels (video streams, forums, seasonal and convention events, interviews, videos, etc.) as the criteria for their generally positive opinion. Some *LoL* players mentioned that communication "could be better" but only one elaborated by saying that Riot Games' communication was "not specific enough" and that the company needs to increase communication with players on the forums by responding to "community based wants" (for example, ideas for character models). *World of Warcraft* players mentioned that their opinions about Blizzard Entertainment's communicative efforts were generally positive, and the "information is there for all that want it." One *WoW* player said, however, that "info is there for people who are [actively] seeking it, but not for those who aren't."

Information from Riot Games was found primarily on the forums followed by third-party sites that gather information from the Public Beta Environment (such as Surrender at 20) and social media. The forums and MMO-Champion were also cited as places to find information clearly from Blizzard Entertainment, but social media (Twitter and Facebook) were also mentioned, as well as in-game support tickets.

Similar to their feelings about Riot getting information out to players, *LoL* players felt "positive on the whole." One player commended them for being mature when dealing with upset players while another considered their interactions with players as "human," with its positives and negatives, but "overall, they're great." *WoW* players felt generally

38

positive as well, though two players mentioned Blizzard as a "faceless company" or "just about the money" in some of their interaction. As one player put it, their interaction is "not as great as it could be. Their customer service is great, but individual interaction compared to previous years is not great. There is not as much individual interaction unless you're in a top guild. Even though they post on forums, most players never see those posts. [They make a good effort] on social media, but they're only reaching a tiny tiny fraction of the player base."

The forums were again the most cited place where players observed interaction between Riot or Blizzard and their players. Only two players, those who played both games, mentioned social media (Twitter and Facebook) as places of interaction. Conventions, such as Penny Arcade Expo and Blizzcon, were also mentioned.

RQ5: Are public relations professionals effectively utilizing the opinion leaders within those channels to reach player audiences?

To answer this question, opinion leaders must first be identified within their respective communities and channels. For some players, friends who first brought a game to their attention and asked them to play were the deciding factor. For others, a friend may have told them about a game, but their decision to adopt came after their own trial and evaluation of the game.

Players were also asked if they had ever taken a hiatus from their game and returned; if they answered in the affirmative, they were asked what made them return. All players except for one *League of Legends* player took a break from their game and then returned. Two players began their hiatuses for technical reasons (no Internet access or a broken computer) and returned when their technical problems were resolved. Two

players stopped playing due to their real life situations (a new job or to focus on studies) and returned once they stabilized. The friends with whom they played their respective games influenced the other eight players. Oftentimes, friends will play with one another, and a game can become boring or lose its appeal if a player does not have a group to play with. Additionally, players may return to a game from a hiatus because their friends are playing it. Another factor affecting players is the game itself: both *WoW* and *LoL* are constantly updated, and these changes can influence a player to return out of curiosity.

A discussion of this research question, and further research needed, can be found in the next section.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

The findings of the previous two chapters indicate that diffusion of innovations, and the focus on opinion leaders, is a good basis for future public relations efforts, particularly in regard to research questions three and five. Both the theory of diffusion of innovations and the playing of video games are social in nature, and public relations efforts should focus on that aspect.

Research Questions

RQ1. The first research question looked at what public relations professionals are currently doing to reach their player audiences. Participants from both public relations firms that work with video game companies and those who work for a video game company identified the same goals: to create awareness in order to generate sales or downloads (knowledge and persuasion stages) and to retain players (also known as continuance, which falls under the confirmation stage).

With those two goals in mind, public relations professionals segment a game's audience in three ways: by platform, by genre, and by type of gamer. The most common method used by participants was by the type of gamer: casual, mobile, hardcore, and midcore. Based on player responses regarding their news gathering habits, public relations professionals seem to be segmenting their players in the most effective ways. Most of the players in this study fell in the casual to midcore categories based on their number of hours played and in their news and opinion gathering habits. Only the two players who played both games and the player whose goal was to get hired by Riot Games fell into the hardcore category due to the greater time and effort they spent in accessing news and opinions.

Current efforts to reach all player audiences include reaching out to print and media outlets and using social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. These communication channels are looked at further in research question three.

RQ2. The second research question asked public relations professionals to identify the challenges they face in reaching out to their player audiences. All participants mentioned the same challenges to varying degrees and included the three categories of time, knowledge and adaptability, and market saturation and standing out. The biggest challenge for all participants was market saturation and standing out. Some recommendations to overcome these challenges were found through interviewing players and may be found in Appendix A.

RQ3. The third research question asked what channels players use versus those that public relations professionals use. As mentioned in research question one above, public relations professionals focus their efforts on print and media outlets as well as social media. Based on player responses, public relations professionals are using the appropriate channels, *but they need to gain a deeper understanding of how players use those channels*. They are segmenting player audiences in the correct way (casual, midcore, hardcore, mobile), but even a casual player dedicated to a game will seek out information specifically for that game.

Only five of the 12 players interviewed mentioned social media for gathering either game news in general or news/opinions for their particular game. Of those five players, only one of the two players who played both games used social media for general game news and news/opinions for both games. The other four used social media for news/opinions about their particular game but preferred forums and blogs over social

media. Learning that the players interviewed did not use social media for information or interaction was a surprise to the researcher as both *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft* have millions of Facebook followers, over 200,000 Twitter followers each, and multiple employees who interact with players via Twitter (this last category is discussed under research question four).

One *LoL* player mentioned that they followed *League of Legends* on Facebook, but that it did not provide very much information (compared to the depth found on the forums). Another *LoL* player declared, "I'm not really a big fan of Twitter. It's just Facebook statuses. It gives me chills." A number of players from both games also mentioned that they did not even have Facebook or Twitter accounts. Finally, one *WoW* player who didn't seek any general game news at all told the researcher, "Outside of game, I tend to spend time working on other things unrelated to gaming."

One possibility for why social media weren't used is that all players were recruited via game forums. This may mean that players who use forums seek different or more in-depth information and opinions than players who rely more on social media. Another possibility is that social media is more useful for smaller companies compared to larger, well-known companies like Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment. One *League of Legends* player noted that Riot Games' communication changed as the company grew,

> I've seen them over the years. At first, they were very active in getting the
> information out to people. You know, sending out emails, doing stuff on
> Facebook. Yeah, you'll occasionally see things on Facebook now, but as I
> said earlier, at this point, they've got enough people on the public beta

server that are paying attention to it and giving their opinions that they really don't have to go ahead and do a constant email stream.

Every player except the *LoL* player who had personal contact with Riot Games employees turned to blogs for both news and opinions. While public relations professionals classify blogs under social media, *blogs function as a much more social channel than either Facebook or Twitter* to this group of players.

Social networks are the essence of diffusion of innovations theory. Blogs function as a social outlet in three different ways: as opinion leaders themselves, as change agents, and as a place for individual opinion leaders to talk with regular players. For example, Surrender at 20, a *League of Legends* blog, may discuss current trends in game play. Players who read these trends may decide to follow them, meaning they view Surrender at 20 as an opinion leader simply because it reports on the popular trends in the current state of the game. MMO-Champion, a *World of Warcraft* blog, often hosts contests for its reader and offers prizes, such as in-game pets, that are provided by Blizzard Entertainment. Because they are offering items directly from the game company (the change agency), they are placing themselves into the role of change agents who can promote the game and continued play.

Both Surrender at 20 and MMO-Champion function as more than blogs that simply report game information. Because they offer readers the ability to comment, they function as places of discussion where frequent commenters or highly-ranked players may share their experiences. Players who follow popular trends identified by other players view those other players as opinion leaders.

Only one participant who played both games identified himself as an opinion leader: "People turn to me for opinions, not the other way around." This player spent a greater amount of time looking up game news for both games, relied on opinions only from professional players of both games (essentially, opinion leaders for this opinion leader), and used more sources for general game news than did the other players interviewed. Social media, particularly Twitter, were useful for this opinion leader along with Surrender at 20 and MMO-Champion. This finding supports the original idea of two-step flow theory outlined by Katz (1957).

While social media and blogs are useful for opinion leaders, only blogs are really useful for the vast majority of players. Public relations professionals should spend the time in the future to understand and even promote blogs as a way to maintain relationships with their player audience. For example, the *World of Warcraft* General Discussion forum has an up-to-date thread called Fansites & Other Resources that lists popular and helpful blogs. Understanding the role and influence of blogs may provide a way to overcome some of the challenges identified in research question two.

RQ4. Research question four asked how successful players felt public relations efforts are. Both communities had an overall positive evaluation of their given companies. Players judged public relations efforts not only on the frequency of communication on the forums, but also on the content, depth, and *the idea that the game company recognized player stances or feelings*.

One of the keys to positive evaluation was based on changes made to a game that players *felt were a result of player and company interaction*, especially for *League of Legends*. For this research question, it was change agents (game company employees)

45

rather than opinion leaders (other players) that determined how successful public relations efforts were. Employees from both companies interact with players on the forums and Twitter in both a personal and professional manner. As one *LoL* player mentioned, "They interact a lot [on the forums], in a lot of ways: to inform, respond to questions, and even to talk and play [with players]. It is a really good relations job." The same player also shared personal experiences and observations, such as Morello (Lead Content Designer for *League of Legends*) posting frequently on the game balance forums and receiving two responses from Riot Games employees in a "joke thread" rather than one focused on serious game discussion. One player who played both games also mentioned other channels besides the forums as sites of interaction: "Rioters [video]stream a lot and talk to the people watching the stream, and people do AMAs [Ask Me Anything] on Reddit [a social news site]."

Two players also mentioned interacting with game company employees on Twitter as part of the reason for their positive evaluation of public relations efforts. One *WoW* player felt Blizzard's interaction with players is beyond what is required:

> I have access to talk to real life GMs [Game Masters] in-game when I
> have problems, I have access to read and respond to blue posts on the
> forums, and the ability to read and respond to Twitter posts made directly
> from game developers.

One player who played both games considered Twitter as a source of information and a site of friendly interaction from Riot Games but not from Blizzard Entertainment. He based this on the idea that Riot Games employees will interact with players regarding topics not related to *League of Legends*:

More Rioters regularly post on Twitter. And respond to players. Not only

that, but Riot employees and posters are, in general, more friendly. I don't

mean to say that Ghostcrawler [Blizzard Entertainment's Lead Systems

Designer who frequently answers player questions via Twitter] isn't a

friendly person. What I do mean is that, I've tweeted something at

Nikasaur [a Riot Games Community Coordinator], and she's responded,

and it's not game related. So, Riot employees talk to non-Rioters about

non-game related things with some frequency. They have friendly

discussion with players. I don't think I've ever seen Ghostcrawler do that.

Blizzard's philosophy with that kind of stuff is different. They are strictly

professional. I'm not saying that that's a bad thing; I love that about

Blizzard. It's just different. It makes them seem less approachable.

Comparing the two companies, it would seem that Riot Games is viewed more

positively than Blizzard Entertainment due to their greater interaction on the forums. One

WoW player stated, "People do seem to go crazy when any employee posts [on the

forums], and that could be because the posts are so few and far between." However, the

simple fact that players have access to Blizzard Entertainment employees resulted in a

WoW player viewing them more positively compared to other entertainment services:

In my opinion, this is definitely above and beyond what I expect from a

product such as this. For a comparison, I pay a similar amount per month

for Netflix service as I do to play *WoW;* I choose this comparison because

both of these products I have purchased for the sole purpose of

entertainment. There are no forums where I can offer suggestions on how I

want my Netflix movies, there is no direct line of communication between

me and the people who pick out which movies to add to the library.

Simply having access to these avenues tells me [Blizzard Entertainment]

really care[s] about their customer base and product, and not just the

bottom line.

Positive evaluations of public relations efforts will likely lead to continued adoption of a

game, though other factors, such as having friends who also play the game, will also

affect adoption, which leads to research question five.

RQ5. Research question five asked players if public relations professionals are

effectively utilizing opinion leaders within particular channels to reach their player

audiences. While this question will require further research, as discussed in a section

below, player responses during interviews highlighted the social nature of video games.

Three types of opinion leaders have been identified in this study: player opinion leaders,

professional players, and blogs. The role of blogs as opinion leaders was discussed above,

so player opinion leaders and professional players will be discussed here.

Almost all players began playing their respective game because a friend asked

them to play with them, and a couple of players were given trial access to a game by the

same friend. Players mentioned discontinuing a game for one of three reasons: technical

problems (lack of access to the Internet or a computer), a real life situation (focusing on a

new job or school), or because their friends stopped playing. For eight players who

stopped and then began playing their game again (re-adopted), it was because their

friends returned to the game. These friends function as opinion leaders for players, and

understanding these opinion leaders may be useful in overcoming some of the challenges in research question two.

Professional players may also be considered opinion leaders. For *League of Legends* in particular, professional players can influence the current style of play. As one participant mentioned, players will form opinions about upcoming game changes and observe professional players to see if their original impressions were validated. Part of this influence may stem from their accessibility; many professional players have video streams and social media presences where players may interact with them.

Riot Games also makes an effort to promote professional players, particularly those that adhere to their code of conduct, through sponsored tournaments and their Featured Streamer Program. This is beneficial to Riot Games in two ways: by helping to maintain a positive player-company relationship, and by maintaining a positive game atmosphere. One of Riot Games's requirements for their Featured Streamer Programs is that players must "commit to abide by Summoner's Code [a code of conduct]." One of the reasons to do so focused on the roles these players play as opinion leaders: "As a person broadcasting to a large audience, it's very important that you follow these rules because your example greatly influences your fans. Helping your fans become better players in both skill and attitude is not just a great social action; it also makes the game more enjoyable and grows your potential audience." (Riot, 2013, para. 3).

Though not quite as visible, progression guilds in *WoW* may also be seen as opinion leaders. A guild is an organization of players that band together for a common purpose or purposes (to socialize, to form a raid of 10 or 25 players in order to defeat difficult boss monsters, to form teams to fight other players, etc.). Progression guilds

focus on raids and require a heavy investment of time from their players, often four or five nights a week for five to six hours a night. These guilds are among the first in their country or the world to defeat all the boss monsters in a raid. Some of these guilds are sponsored by gaming-related hardware and software companies.

As one participant mentioned, they visit World of Logs (http://www.worldoflogs.com), a site that analyzes combat in *WoW* and allows players to save, share, and analyze their fights or individual performance in raids. Many progression guilds upload logs of their raids. World of Logs also provides player rankings for individual fights; the top-ranked individuals are almost always players from progression guilds. People looking at this information are likely to change their play style (such as their character class) to match those of players from progression guilds in order to remain competitive. However, there is less interaction between progression guilds and players than there is between professional *LoL* players and other players, though some progression guilds do video stream their raids. Identifying and promoting these opinion leaders may help public relations professionals to overcome some of the challenges identified in research question two.

Additional Communication Opportunities

Public relations professionals should also adapt their tactics based on the communication opportunities their game presents, which may help overcome the second challenge identified in research question two. There is great variation in games even within a particular genre or platform. As one participant pointed out, both *WoW* and *LoL* provide different communication opportunities though both are played on a PC. The

nature of the game is a determining factor in how either game company disseminates information or interacts with the audience.

Both *WoW* and *LoL* are accessed through a game launcher, a gateway program that handles downloading and installing updates for the game to ensure it is up to date. In addition to updating their respective game, both launchers provide links to game news and information. Though both games have launchers, the nature of the games determine additional communication opportunities. *League of Legends* game sessions last between 20 to 60 minutes at a time; when not in a game, players can use the game client to customize their settings, purchase playable champions or other items, and chat with other players. The client is updated throughout each day to provide news, such as the availability of new champions or technical issues. Since players are returned to the client after every game session, changes or updates are readily visible.

Comparatively, *World of Warcraft* players are immersed in a game world that is persistent rather than session-based. Technical and maintenance information is displayed on the login screen before players enter the world. Players will not return to a client between short game sessions, so they will not see updates or changes while in the game unless they access information from an outside source or are forced out of the game world, such as when a game server goes offline in the middle of play. The nature of a game can determine in-game or in-client communication opportunities, and it can also determine which outside channels public relations professionals should access.

It is also important for public relations professionals to understand that the nature of their game may influence their player base. Within this small sample, generational differences in preferred genre and information gathering may be hinted at. The five

players from *World of Warcraft* were all above the age of 30 and none were students, whereas the five players from *League of Legends* were between 18 and 26 with three of them being students. When asked about where they seek information about games in general, the *WoW* players were less inclined to seek information about other games and instead focused on *WoW*-related sites.

On the other hand, *LoL* players cited friends, Google, and other websites as places they go for information. Based on this small sample, it would seem that older players have a tendency to focus on one game while younger players are more inclined to focus on more than one. It may also be that the MMORPG genre appeals more to older players while the MOBA genre appeals more to younger players. However, the participants who played both games provide a reason for caution against these generalizations without a larger sample: both were younger than 30, both were students, and both sought more information about *League of Legends*, *World of Warcraft*, and games in general than other participants. These observations highlight some of the limitations of this study.

Limitations

The greatest limitation of this study was the small number of participants, particularly for player interviews. Due to time and financial constraints, this study was able to focus only on two game communities with a small sample from each. Findings from this study indicate that the channels players use for information and opinion depend on the game, and that a greater understanding of communication channels is needed. This could be accomplished through a narrow study that focuses on a single game, or through a major study that focuses on a particular genre, though both were beyond the capability and purview of this thesis.

Another limitation of this study is the uneven breadth and depth provided by the different channels used for interviews. All participants were given the option of telephone, email, Skype, or (for players) in-game chat. The richest information was provided by Skype because it allowed the researcher to provide immediate feedback, clarification, and follow-up questions. All player participants, except the one who was in direct contact with Riot Games employees, were emailed a follow-up question asking where they first heard about Surrender at 20 or MMO-Champion. Due to the asynchronous nature of email, only five players responded, leaving a possible gap in findings.

Recommendations for Public Relations Professionals

The ultimate aim of this study was to identify challenges faced by public relations professionals in the gaming industry and to provide recommendations on possible ways to overcome some of those challenges. An executive summary and recommendations based on diffusion of innovations and opinion leaders may be found in the Appendix.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study demonstrates a practical application of diffusion of innovations theory to the field of public relations and to the social nature of video games. It also extends the diffusion framework to another discipline and contributes to the emerging literature on diffusion and video games, and diffusion and public relations. Additionally, the player opinion leader who self-identified supports two-step flow theory and touches on how what is considered media today is evolving from Katz's (1957) original use of the term. While not all the findings here can be generalized to other game genres or platforms, this

study may provide a starting point for further qualitative studies and a basis for quantitative research.

Ultimately, further research is needed in the area of public relations and the video game industry, particularly regarding research question four, which asks how successful player audiences feel public relations efforts are, and research question five, which asks if public relations professionals effectively use the opinion leaders within those channels to reach player audiences. Both questions are highly subjective and will require larger samples from specific game audiences to have a useful meaning for professionals.

As mentioned previously, four methods have been used in studies to identify opinion leaders: the sociometric method (Valente & Davis, 1999), asking key informants (Buller at al., 2001), self-designation (Valente & Davis, 1999), and observation (Rogers, 2003). These methods may be helpful in future studies focused on identifying and understanding opinion leaders but will require greater resources and sample sizes.

Future studies should focus on finding participants from each channel (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, forums, etc.) to provide a more complete evaluation of public relations efforts. Additionally, a larger sample from each channel (such as the forums for this study) would be useful in determining if the finding from this thesis that players only use one or two channels for information or opinions about a particular game holds true. Content analysis of the communicative efforts of game companies may also be beneficial in future studies. For example, in-depth analysis of social media interaction versus forum interaction could help determine what players find the most engaging or helpful, or why players use one channel and not the other.

Gauging the public relations efforts of the video game industry as a whole would be a massive undertaking. Instead, the scope of future studies should be narrowed to focus on genres and/or platforms, or even particular game titles within those categories because there is great variation in games even within a particular genre or platform.

Though this study was unable to provide a solution to the greatest challenges faced by public relations professionals in the video game industry, it has provided insight into opinion leaders and their role in the continued adoption of a video game. Ultimately, further research focusing on particular genres, games, and channels is needed to form a comprehensive picture of public relations in the video game industry.

References

BBC News. (2012, March 21). *Game sales surpassed video in UK, says report.* Retrieved from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17458205

Brenner, J. (2012, November 13). *Pew Internet: Social networking (full detail).* Retrieved from Pew Internet: http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx

Breslau, R. (2012, October 22). *League of Legends Season 2 Championships most watched eSports event of all time.* Retrieved from GameSpot: http://www.gamespot.com/news/league-of-legends-season-2-championships-most-watched-esports-event-of-all-time-6398663

Buller, D. B., Woodall, W. G., Zimmerman, D. E., Heimendinger, J., Rogers, E. M., Slater, M. D., & … LeBlance, M. L. (2001). Formative research activities to provide web-based nutrition education to adults in the Upper Rio Grande Valley. *Family and Community Health, 24*(3), 1-12.

Byeng-hee, C., Seung-Eun, L., & Byoung-Sun, K. (2006). Exploring factors affecting the adoption and continuance of online games among college students in South Korea: Integrating uses and gratification and diffusion of innovation approaches. *New Media & Society, 8*(2), 295-319. doi:10.1177/1461444806059888

Cheng, J. (2007, June 23). *Report: Video game spending to surpass music spending this year.* Retrieved from Ars Technica: http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2007/06/report-video-game-spending-to-surpass-music-spending-this-year/

Clark, L. (2012, August 1). *US army seeking new shooter game featuring suicide bombers, by 2013.* Retrieved from Wired UK:

http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-08/01/us-army-shooter-game

Clement, M., Fabel, S., & Schmidt-Stolting, C. (2006). Diffusion of hedonic goods: A literature review. JMM: *The International Journal On Media Management, 8*(4), 155-163. doi:10.1207/s14241250ijmm0804_1

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Edelstein, B. L. (2011). Examining whether dental therapists constitute a disruptive innovation in US dentistry. *American Journal Of Public Health, 101*(10), 1831-1835.

Entertainment Software Association. (2012). *2012 Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*. Retrieved from:

http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2012.pdf

eTurboNews (2011, August 17). *German gaming industry revenues surpass music and cinema.* Retrieved from http://www.eturbonews.com/24683/german-gaming-industry-revenues-surpass-music-and-cinema

Fiegerman, S. (2012, December 18). *Twitter now has more than 200 million monthly active users*. Retrieved from Mashable: http://mashable.com/2012/12/18/twitter-200-million-active-users/

Gaudiosi, J. (2012, July 11). *Riot Games' League of Legends officially becomes most played PC game in the world*. Retrieved from Forbes:

http://www.forbes.com/sites/johngaudiosi/2012/07/11/riot-games-league-of-legends-officially-becomes-most-played-pc-game-in-the-world/

Goldfarb, A. (2012, May 1). *League of Legends Season 2 Championship Announced*. Retrieved from IGN: http://pc.ign.com/articles/122/1224149p1.html

Henrich, J. (2001), Cultural transmission and the diffusion of innovations: Adoption dynamics indicate that biased cultural transmission is the predominate force in behavioral change. *American Anthropologist, 103,* 992–1013. doi: 10.1525/aa.2001.103.4.992

Johnson, M. A., & Kim, D. H. (2009). News coverage of the failed Plensa Project: How framing affected the diffusion of public art. *Atlantic Journal Of Communication, 17*(4), 184-201. doi:10.1080/15456870903182783

Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *Political Opinion Quarterly, 21*(1), 61-78.

Kelly, J. A., St. Lawrence, J. S., Diaz, Y. E., Stevenson L. Y., Hauth, A. C., Brasfield, T. L., & … Andrew, M. E. (1991). HIV risk behavior reduction following intervention with key opinion leaders of population: An experimental analysis. *American Journal of Public Health, 81*(2), 168-171.

Lawler, R. (2012, December 6). *YouTube is launching a redesign to reduce clutter and put videos front and center*. Retrieved from TechCrunch: http://techcrunch.com/2012/12/06/youtube-redesign-i-like-videos/

Lazardsfeld, P. F., Berelson B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Leonard-Barton, D. (1985). Experts as negative opinion leaders in the diffusion of a

    technological innovation. *Journal Of Consumer Research, 11*(4), 914-926.

Lish. (2011, December 6). *MLG delivers largest season in eSports history.* Retrieved

    from Major League Gaming: http://www.majorleaguegaming.com/news/mlg-

    delivers-the-largest-season-in-esports-history

Lunden, I. (2012, July 31). *Twitter may have 500M+ users but only 170M are active,*

    75% on Twitter's own clients. Retrieved from TechCrunch:

    http://techcrunch.com/2012/07/31/twitter-may-have-500m-users-but-only-170m-

    are-active-75-on-twitters-own-clients/

Magee, K. (2006, December 18). *MLG awards $1.75 million in contracts for top pro*

    gamers. Retrieved from Major League Gaming:

    http://www.majorleaguegaming.com/news/mlg-awards-1-75-million-in-contracts-

    for-top-pro-gamers/ , k

NPD Group. (2010, September 20). *PC full-game digital downloads surpass retail unit*

    sales. Retrieved from: https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-

    releases/pr_100920/

NPD Group. (2011). *Gamer segmentation 2011: The new faces of gamers*. Retrieved

    from: https://www.npd.com/lps/pdf/Gamer_Segmentation_2011_Snapshot.pdf

NPD Group. (2011, June 27). *Digital Gamers closing on Core Gamers for top gamer*

    segment. Retrieved from: https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-

    releases/pr_110627/

Olson, C., Kutner, L., & Warner, D. (2008). The role of violet video game content in

    adolescent development. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 23*(1), 55-75.

Peck, M. (2012, February 7). *Forget* Call of Duty *and* Battlefield. *Real military training*

  needs a different kind of game. Retrieved from Kotaku:

  http://kotaku.com/5883105/forget-call-of-duty-and-battlefield-real-military-

  training-needs-a-different-kind-of-game

Poindexter, P. M., & McCombs, M. E. (2000). *Research in mass communication: A*

  practical guide. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Protalinski, E. (2012, October 4). *600 million of Facebook's 1 billion users are mobile*.

  Retrieved from TheNextWeb:

  http://thenextweb.com/facebook/2012/10/04/facebook-now-has-600-million-

  monthly-active-mobile-users/

Ratts, M. (2011). The fierce urgency of now: Diffusion of innovation as a mechanism to

  integrate social justice in counselor education. *Counselor Education &*

  Supervision, 50(3), 207-223.

Riot Games. (2012). *Season 2 World Championship*. Retrieved from:

  http://competitive.na.leagueoflegends.com/season-2-world-championship

Riot Games. (2013). *Featured Streamer Program*. Retrieved from:

  http://competitive.na.leagueoflegends.com/streamers/info

Rogers, E. M. (1976). New product adoption and diffusion. *Journal of Consumer*

  Research, 2(4), 290-301.

Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Rogers, E. M. (2004). A prospective and retrospective look at the diffusion model.

  Journal Of Health Communication, 9, 13-19. doi:10.1080/10810730490271449

Rogers, E. M., & Bhowmik, D. K. (1970). Homophily-heterophily: Relational concepts for communication research. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 34*(4), 523-538.

Rogers, E. M., & Kincaid, D. L. (1981). *Communication networks: Toward a new paradigm for research*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Schleien, S. J., & Miller, K. D. (2010). Diffusion of innovation: A roadmap for inclusive community recreation services. *Research & Practice For Persons With Severe Disabilities, 35*(3/4), 93-101.

Squire, K. (2011). *Video games and learning: Teaching and participatory culture in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Summers, J. O. (1971). Generalized change agents and innovativeness. *Journal of Marketing Research, 8*(3), 313-316.

Thompson, G. N., Estabrooks, C. A., & Degner, L. F. (2006). Clarifying the concepts in knowledge transfer: a literature review. *Journal Of Advanced Nursing, 53*(6), 691-701. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.03775.x

Tierney, J. (2001, August 5). *Electronic game maker lets kids do their marketing for them*. Retrieved from The New York Times:

http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/05/magazine/05POX.html?pagewanted=all

U.S. Army PEO STRI (2012, November 23). *U.S. Army games for training program*. Retrieved from: http://www.peostri.army.mil/PRODUCTS/USAGFTP/

Valente, T. W., & Davis, R. L. (1999). Accelerating the diffusion of innovations using opinion leaders. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 566*(1), 55-67. doi:10.1177/000271629956600105

Wellin, E. (1955). Water boiling in a Peruvian town. In D. P. Benjamin (Ed.), *Health, culture, and community: Case studies of public reactions to health programs*. (pp. 71-102). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Whelan, S. (2003). Uneven diffusion of innovation within the international cellular telecommunications market: Lessons for Irish firms. *Irish Marketing Review, 16*(1), 25-30.

Williams, D., Yee, N., & Caplan, S. E. (2008). Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*, 993-1018. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00428.x

Zhu, J. H., & He, Z. (2002). Perceived characteristics, perceived needs, and perceived popularity: Adoption and use of the Internet in China. *Communication Research, 29*(4), 466-495.

APPENDIX

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS

CURRENTLY EMPLOYED IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

The aim of this study was to identify challenges faced by public relations professionals in the video game industry. The three challenges identified were time, knowledge and adaptability, and market saturation and standing out. To provide recommendations to possibly overcome some of these challenges, players from two existing game communities were interviewed regarding their experiences with games in general, their particular game, and the company behind their particular game. Recommendations are framed using diffusion of innovations theory and the role of opinion leaders.

Ultimately, further research is needed in the realm of video games and public relations, and video games and diffusion of innovations. While these recommendations may not completely overcome any or all challenges, they may address one aspect of a challenge and provide a starting point for future research and public relations efforts.

There are a few terms that must be defined in relation to this study. Adoption occurs when a player purchases (or downloads) a game and begins playing it. Change agencies are organizations driving the adoption of an innovation; they employ change agents. In the case of this study, video game companies are change agencies, and the public relations professionals they employ are change agents. Opinion leaders are individuals (or entities, such as media outlets or blogs) that influence others in adopting a game or how they currently play a game.

The innovation-decision process involves five stages: 1) knowledge or awareness of the innovation; 2) persuasion, when an individual forms a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the innovation; 3) the decision to adopt or reject the innovation; 4) implementation, using the innovation; and 5) confirmation, during which an individual will seek reinforcement about their adoption decision (Rogers, 2003). Public relations professionals are primarily focused on the knowledge and persuasion stages when they generate awareness and interest in a game. They are focused on the confirmation stage when they build and maintain relationships (community management) with players so they will continue playing (also known as continuance).

1) Use Multiple Communication Channels

This is important for all three stages of the innovation-diffusion process that public relations professionals are focused on: knowledge, persuasion, and confirmation. The knowledge and persuasion tactic mentioned most by public relations professionals was reaching out to media outlets. Game studios also focus on creating knowledge and awareness through social media. Both of these channels are important because they reach opinion leaders. Similar to other industries, the opinion leader who self-identified in this study was exposed to more media than other individuals and often shares his opinions with friends.

Based on player responses, it seems that the average player will follow one or two communication channels for information and opinions about their game. Channels such as forums and blogs are oriented towards continuance (in the confirmation stage), where a player's continued playing of a game depends on the information and opinions they receive.

Using multiple channels may also be important in overcoming the challenge of market saturation and standing out because players follow so few channels. It is possible to miss creating awareness in players by not using the same channels they do.

2) Encourage Game Company Employees to Interact With Players

Though few players mentioned social media in this study, the number of Facebook "likes" and Twitter followers relay that there are players who rely on and interact through social media. As mentioned above, this means that players will stick to their chosen channels, and it is important to interact on multiple channels to reach a wide player base. For both *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends*, their forums and Twitter are great sources of company-player interaction.

Both games' forums feature a "tracker" (game developer tracker), that compiles a list of all the forum threads and individual forum posts made by company employees. As one *WoW* player mentioned, they will read any thread that has a "blue post" (a post by a Blizzard Entertainment employee) in it. Many players described the forums as places where they see meaningful interaction. For example, Riot Games employees will create forum threads that detail their reasons for game changes, followed by asking for feedback from players. Employee responses do not always have to be serious; one player "even…got a red [Riot Games] response on a joke thread. Two to be more accurate."

Many individual Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment employees have Twitter accounts that they use to interact with players, both professionally and personally. Having access to the individuals behind the company helps to build and maintain player relationships, which is important for continuance. This also affects players sharing their

opinions and games with new players, the most trusted and common source of initial adoption of a game.

In addition to building and maintaining player relationships for continuance, encouraging employees to post on the forums helps to portray a game company as being adaptable. While public relations professionals mentioned having knowledge of the video game industry and being adaptable in the sense that there may be development and release delays, adaptability is also important in the eyes of players. Many players mentioned they had positive viewpoints toward Riot Games' public relations efforts because of how often these employees posted on their forums. Not only that, but their posts were very interactive by having employees take an active part in discussions with players regarding their feedback. In the end, it is actually seeing changes made in response to these discussions that resulted in such positive opinions. In this way, players view Riot Games as adaptable.

3) **Understand Your Game's Communication Opportunities**

One of the challenges identified was knowledge and adaptability, meaning that public relations professionals need knowledge of their game and knowledge of the industry, and that they must be adaptable based on the state of the industry and the development timeline of their game. This recommendation is focused on knowledge of a game rather than the industry.

The nature of a game determines the communication opportunities it can present. While many companies have their own website and forums dedicated to a game, they also provide information on updates or maintenance to players through the game itself. Both *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends* have launchers, a gateway program that

handles downloading and installing updates for the game to ensure it is up to date. In addition to updating their respective games, both launchers provide links to game news and information.

Though both games have launchers, the nature of the games determines additional communication opportunities. *League of Legends* game sessions last between 20 to 60 minutes at a time; when not in a game, players can use the game client to customize their settings, purchase playable champions or other items, and chat with other players. The client is updated throughout the day to provide news, such as the availability of new champions or technical issues. Since players are returned to the client after every game session, changes or updates are readily visible.

Comparatively, *World of Warcraft* players are immersed in a game world that is persistent rather than session-based. Technical and maintenance information is displayed on the login screen before players enter the world. Players will not return to a client between short game sessions, so they will not see updates or changes while in the game unless they access information from an outside source or are forced out of the game world, such as when a game server goes offline in the middle of play. It is important for public relations professionals to be aware of the different communication opportunities their game presents in order for them to effectively provide information to their players.

4) Encourage Social Gaming

To help overcome the challenge of time as a commodity for players, the social aspects of games should not be ignored. Almost all players began playing their respective game because a friend asked them to play with them. Many players also mentioned returning from a hiatus or discontinuing a game based on the presence (or lack thereof) of

their friends. Though a player may be playing multiple games, those that they can play with a friend (or a group of friends) have a higher relative advantage compared to other games, and they may dedicate their time to a game accordingly.

Encouraging social gaming can be effective for both initial adoption and continuance. For example, one player mentioned he began playing because a friend gave him a trial pass to *World of Warcraft* while another player was given access to the *WoW* beta (the development phase of a game where players test features and provide feedback) and kept playing after the game was released. Both *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends* also have a referral or "recruit a friend" system, where players are rewarded with in-game items or currency when the recruited player reaches a particular level in the game.

5) Identify and Recognize Popular Blogs

Blogs now go beyond simply being "blogs" and include news aggregation, databases, and social interaction. Because of this, they may play the role of opinion leaders for players who visit them. They also facilitate social interaction and provide a place where opinion leaders can reach a greater number of individuals through their comments and discussions on the blog compared to simply speaking to friends. The *World of Warcraft* General Forum has an up-to-date thread called Fansites & Other Resources that includes the names and links of popular blogs. In addition to that, Blizzard Entertainment provides some blogs, such as MMO-Champion, with prizes, such as in-game pets, for their contests. In this way, blogs may act as change agents who maintain a positive relationship with players so that they continue to play their game.

6) **Identify and Recognize Professional Players**

Professional players can be powerful opinion leaders in a game community. They may write a blog that functions similarly to those above by providing a place for social interaction, though they may not go to the extent of creating a database or hosting a forum. Professional players are more effective at individual interaction than blogs are. For example, professional *League of Legends* players often stream live video while they are playing games. As they are playing, players watching chat with both the professional player and other watchers and also ask questions about the game, advice on how to improve their own play, and provide requests to professional players (for example, they will ask them to play a particular character in their next game).

Players will often emulate game choices and actions they see professional players perform, meaning that they view them as opinion leaders. Riot Games began a Featured Streamer Program in September 2012 that endorses and promotes players as a reward for increasing their number of viewers and having compelling, live content. In return, they ask featured streamers to adhere to their code of conduct. In this way, featured streamers promote the attitude that Riot Games seeks to foster in their community and may be viewed as change agents.

In Closing

I would like to extend my gratitude to all the public relations professionals who took the time to share your experiences in and knowledge of the video game industry with me. It is my hope that my insights from this study will be helpful to you in the future as you work with these audiences.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS

1. Who are the intended audiences for your games?

2. What are your goals for each of your audiences?

3. What are you doing now to reach these audiences?

4. What are some of the biggest challenges you face when it comes to reaching your audiences?

5. What is your biggest challenge when it comes to reaching your audiences?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: PLAYERS

Demographics

1. How long have you been playing World of Warcraft/League of Legends?

2. How many hours a week would you say you play WoW/LoL?

3. Would state (or country) are you in?

4. What do you do?

5. How old are you?

6. What ethnicity are you?

7. Are you a man or a woman?

Regarding Games in General

1. Where do you get news or information?

2. Do you have a favorite or preferred method?

3. Do you ever post on forums or blogs?

Regarding WoW/LoL

1. How did you first hear about the game?

2. What made you decide to start playing?

3. If you ever stopped playing and then you began playing again, what brought you back?

4. Where do you go to get information about the game, such as patch notes, game mechanics, etc.?

5. Do you have a favorite or preferred method of getting game info/news?

6. Who do you turn to for opinions about the game, such as upcoming changes?

Regarding Blizzard Entertainment/Riot Games

1. How do you feel Blizzard Entertainment/Riot Games is doing in getting

   information out to players?

2. Where have you personally seen information that is clearly from Blizzard/Riot?

3. How do you feel about Blizzard's/Riot's interaction with players?