Article

Broken Promises Marketing. Relations, Communication Strategies, and Ethics of Video Game Journalists and Developers: The Case of *Cyberpunk 2077*

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Abstract

Cyberpunk 2077's negative reception stood in striking contrast to the pre-release hype around the video game built by the producer's marketing campaign and the gaming press. This study examines a selection of gaming websites, to consider their pre-release *Cyberpunk 2077* coverage and the discrepancies between these early reports and the released game. Using inductive conventional content analysis, framed as thematic analysis, 148 press articles were investigated divided into nine subcategories, and three categories. These articles told an almost exclusively positive narrative, promising great performance and features. The uncritical reception of publisher information by journalists allows the authors to propose the notion of "broken promises marketing". The article contextualizes this term in the gaming ecosystem, arguing that over-optimistic marketing is amplified through features of the online press ecology. Finally, the results are considered from a business ethics perspective, with a set of communications recommendations for both journalists and game publishers.

Keywords

game journalism, game industry, ethics, marketing, Cyberpunk 2077

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Introduction

Cyberpunk 2077 (2020, CD Projekt Red) is an open-world, action-adventure role-playing video game set in a dystopian future, full of cyberpunk technology and a deeply divided society with the elites ruling Night City from the height of their skyscrapers and numerous gangs roaming the City's streets. The game's premiere was accompanied by controversy, stemming from its repeated delays, the underdevelopment of the final product, and especially: how the company dealt with these problems. The paper examines these issues at the confluence of corporate communication strategies and journalism. While other critical analyses point out the lack of depth of the in-game world and its politics (e.g., Maj, 2022; Zarzycka, 2022), such issues are outside of the scope here.

Based on Mike Pondsmith's tabletop role-playing game series *Cyberpunk 2020* (1988 − 2020, R. Talsorian Games), *Cyberpunk 2077* was officially announced by CD Projekt Red (CDPR) in May 2012. Apart from the game's setting, the other points highlighted about the game included nonlinearity and advanced RPG mechanics. Aside from occasional communique (e.g., occasional short promotional videos on YouTube), the company did not market it extensively between 2013 and 2018, with a full promotional campaign only launching in 2019 (Williams, 2020).

Frelik et al. (2022) claim that prior "to its release, it was one of the most eagerly awaited titles in a long time with expectations (…) shaped by the global success of CD Projekt Red's Witcher series (…)" (Frelik et al., 2022, p. 3). *The Witcher* (2007) was CDPR's first big title, popular mostly in Poland and neighboring countries. (Kosman, 2015, pp. 349–350). In turn, *The Witcher 2 Assassins of Kings* (2011) caught the eye of gamers outside of Europe, giving the company some broader recognition (see Schreier, 2017, p. 302). However, the third part, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), vastly surpassed its predecessors in sales and critical success, receiving many industry and press awards, and worldwide recognition (Schreier, 2017, pp. 299–300). For example, the GameSpot website called the game "one of the best roleplaying games ever crafted, a titan among giants and the standard-setter for all such games going forward" (VanOrd, 2015).

Thanks to these successes, CDPR became an essential brand for players, one that becomes associated positively with memories and histories experienced in previous games – and shaping their future shopping habits (e.g., Palomba, 2018, Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). Gamers tend to buy games because of the brand, as they assume it shows qualities they value (Lin, 2010; Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). Before *Cyberpunk 2077,* CDPR was valued not only because of high-quality games but it was also perceived as gamer-friendly (see, e.g., Epps, 2020, Siuda & Troszynski, 2017), even to the point where gamers and journalists were willing to tolerate to an extent accusations of difficult working conditions for employees (see, e.g., Burton, 2022; Morris, 2017; Purchese, 2017). All of this meant CDPR's next product – *Cyberpunk 2077* – was highly anticipated. Adding to the hype was the popularity of the *Cyberpunk* source material, especially *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990, R. Talsorian Games), which formed the base for the game's aesthetics and world (Attebery & Pearson, 2017).

Jan Švelch (2017) researched hype in the context of game trailers, understood as a focal point for video game promotion and one of the most characteristic symbols of the game industry. Švelch distinguishes two main forms of reaction to trailers: excitement (hype) and cynicism, both directly connected with building consumers' expectations about the game based on trailer content. The explicit goal of trailers is to encourage pre-orders. However, as Švelch points out, there also is a "hidden" connection between trailers and gamers' emotions. One of the examples that the developers can get into trouble if players' expectations (and emotions) are too high is *No Man's Sky* (2016, Hello Games). The game generated consumer complaints and negative reviews because of mis-leading adverts and huge discrepancies between the final product and what was promised in the trailer (Lu et al., 2020). The reaction went as far as engaging in so-called review bombing (see, e.g., Moro & Birt, 2022) to lower the game's rating.

For *Cyberpunk 2077*, the hype was fueled by a large-scale marketing campaign. The 131 million USD spent was equal to 45% of the whole game's budget (Woldański, 2021), placing the game firmly in the Triple-A market segment. In this segment, marketing strategies strongly influence gamer reactions (see e.g., Şengün, 2018; Wawrowski & Otola, 2020; Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012) which is essential not only for sales and the final success of the game but also for the company's repu-tation. It should be noted, when considering the success or failure of a given marketing campaign, one must look beyond just the game's revenue and player opinions. There are other factors here, both external (e.g., general market situation) or internal (e.g., the way a company functions, and its problems). These and other cultural and social factors are also important but are outside this paper's scope.

While aware of the complexities of high-profile game publishing (e.g., Rabowsky, 2009), we focus solely on *Cyberpunk 2077* and the controversies surrounding its release. Despite, and perhaps partially because of high expectations, the game turned out to be "one of the most disastrously received titles, primarily because of its dismal performance (…)" (Frelik et al., 2022, p. 3). Additionally, there were "reports of intensive pre-release crunch and the developer's less-than-transparent informational PR campaigns and investor misinformation" (Frelik et al., 2022, p. 3; see also Schreier, 2021).

This paper aims to show how a selection of gaming press services portrayed *Cyberpunk 2077* before its release, allowing us to observe how expectations were grad-ually built. This is done by analyzing press articles on how the final game will look like, but also those showing the scope of CDPR's marketing campaign. These materi-als themselves became more or less a direct part of this campaign and influenced hype. We consider the following research questions: which marketing actions were com-mented on and how? What did the services "promise" about the game? How exactly did video games journalists see *Cyberpunk 2077* and CDPR and was it a more positive or negative view – and finally, what can be learned from the debacle?

This study is written from the perspective of communication and media studies, supported by business ethics considerations. The case study analysis leads us toward broader conclusions on the shape of communication in today's game industry.

It also leads to guidelines for developers and video game journalists alike. Along with other entities, especially communities, and stakeholders, developers and journalists make up a complex gaming ecosystem. By showing how work progressed on *Cyberpunk 2077* up to its premiere, this paper proposes to suggest how this ecosystem can be "improved."

We introduce the notion of "broken promises marketing," defined as a gap between how the game is positively portrayed pre-release and how it finally looks during its premiere. "Broken promises marketing" is not only about developers' promotion strategies, but also general relations, and communication (culture) of both producers and game journalists. The latter "are understood as actively engaged in producing and negotiating the value and meaning of video games" (Carlson, 2009).

All this is important considering both developers' and journalists' communication practices are informative and persuasive at the same time (see, e.g., Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). While informing is neutral, without the intention of influencing audiences, persuasion is the opposite, and the final goal here is to sell a given game (at least a goal for producers). Broken promises are thus significant from the business ethics perspective, and games that "offer inferior quality compared to what is being claimed (…) are likely to be unethical" (Harviainen et al., 2020, p. 773). In this regard, researchers often focus on micropayments and free-to-play games showing how misleading these can be (Harviainen et al., 2020; Heimo et al., 2018). Here, we instead focus on "broken promises marketing", which we see as highly unethical and harming the producers' long-term interests.

Methods

To analyze press articles from before *Cyberpunk 2077*'s release, we used conventional content analysis, framed as a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). We did not use preconceived categories, as these emerged from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki et al., 2002). Press materials were sampled using the following criteria:

1. *Articles were published in specific services.* We considered venues focused solely on video games, as these gave *Cyberpunk 2077* more attention than any other kind of portals. According to research done by the influential Polish website WirtualneMedia (*Gry-online.pl na czele, Steamcommunity przed Epicgames, a Twitch przed PPE.pl (TOP10 serwisów o grach),* n.d.), three services have a particularly high reach in Poland – GRY-OnLine.pl, Eurogamer, and PPE. These were chosen for the study. Only Polish websites were considered, and this seems particularly suitable due to CDPR being a Polish company. In Poland it is considered crucial to the development of the whole creative sector (Kędzierski, 2022; Siuda et al., 2013; Siuda & Troszynski, 2017; Ziętarski, 2019), hence Polish media await another CDPR's successes, often referencing the previous ones (*CD Projekt,* n.d.).

2. *Articles were published from June 9, 2019, to December 12, 2020.* Media interest in *Cyberpunk 2077* increased in June 2019 after the game trailer was presented at E3 Expo (09.06.2019). It was after E3 that CDPR started ramping up promotion (Na marketing Cyberpunk 2077" CD Projekt wyda więcej niż na „Wiedźmina 3", gra na rynku najszybciej pod koniec 2019 roku, n.d.). Additionally, our research focuses on the pre-release period, hence we gathered material from before the final premiere (10.12.2020).

The content analysis was carried out in November and December of 2022 in several stages: 1) searching for all articles on *Cyberpunk 2077* using the aforementioned criteria; 2) identifying all articles important for our research (reading through all texts found and deciding which ones should be analyzed); 3) multiple close reading of all identified articles and creating and defining subcategories and categories; 4) building a quotation database corresponding to all subcategories.

In the first stage, two main keywords were used while searching for articles: "*Cyberpunk 2077*" (and its variants "Cyberpunk" and "Cyberpunk2077") and CD Projekt Red (and its variants: "CD Projekt"; "CDProjektRed," "CDProjekt"). After finding all articles on *Cyberpunk 2077*, in the second stage, any duplicates were eliminated, and the selection was narrowed down to texts about marketing and those describing what the final product will look like. As a result, 148 articles from the indicated timeframe and websites were included in the study. A complete list of articles is presented as a dataset in figshare repository (see the Data Availability section). The list organizes the articles by date of publication and gives the authors, title, service, and web address. Articles were assigned identifiers (001 to 148), and we include these whenever we quote a given text in the presented article. The exact dates of the articles are not always given in the Results but can be found in the database. In the text, we limit ourselves to indicating the timeframe, i.e., month and year, when the most articles on a given topic appeared.

The third stage was a manual analysis. Identifying subcategories and categories was preceded by a close reading of the articles while highlighting parts relevant to the study. Nine subcategories were identified, then merged into three main categories, as presented in Table 1. Since an article could be included in multiple subcategories, the number of texts across the subcategories exceeds the total number of articles. The fourth stage concentrated on building a quotation database for each subcategory. The next section of the paper discusses the subcategories in turn while using these quotes.

Results

C01: Game Promotion; SC01: Collaboration with Brands and Additional Products

CDPR had extensively collaborated with external companies of a diverse profile, to create specific products based on their brands, e.g., a board game, action figures,

Table 1. Categories, Subcategories, and Their Definitions.

Category	Subcategories	Number of articles
Category 1 (C01) **Game promotion**	Subcategory 1 (SC01) **Collaboration with brands and additional products** Cooperation of CDPR with external companies (co-marketing) and its results (e.g., additional products). Reports on material items connected to the game, e.g., limited edition items, books, collectibles. (Collector's editions and action figures were distributed both by CDPR and by external companies).	50
	Subcategory 2 (SC02) **Ads** Articles relating to any forms of advertising *Cyberpunk 2077* except for the co-marketing and material items indicated above.	9
Category 2 (C02) **Promises**	Subcategory 3 (SC03) **Multiplayer** Any information on planned multiplayer mode, including its features and monetization issues.	16
	Subcategory 4 (SC04) **Mechanics** Any information on game mechanics, e.g., all articles relating to character creation and development. Information on any potential possibilities that the game world will offer regarding the mechanics.	24
	Subcategory 5 (SC05) **Sound** Information on the in-game sound, including on the soundtrack.	14
	Subcategory 6 (SC06) **The story** Articles related to the story, its time, and space including the construction of the latter. Information relating to the main plot, side missions, the world presented, and the length of the game.	25
Category 3 (C03) **Game development**	Subcategory 7 (SC07) **Performance** Any information related to game performance. Due to the period of the study analyzed articles considered only old-generation consoles (XBOX One and PlayStation 4) and personal computers (PCs).	15

Table 1. (continued)

Category	Subcategories	Number of articles
	Subcategory 8 (SC08) **Delays** Articles on postponing the premiere.	19
	Subcategory 9 (SC09) **Pre-release ratings and reactions** First pre-release evaluations and information on initial gamer reactions.	3

Source: own research

limited editions of hardware (pads, consoles, gaming chairs, etc.), clothing, home décor accessories, books, sodas, and many more. The websites reported on such products, often encouraging people to visit the official CDPR shop, and emphasizing the exclusive nature of these items.

The collector's edition of the game was discussed the most often. It was first mentioned a day after the E3 Expo (June 2019), and the journalist from PPE openly encouraged pre-orders: "The set has been priced at 750zł, and those interested should pre-order as soon as possible" (002). Overall, the articles listed and praised the contents of the edition, and CDPR's policy was assessed positively in comparison to industry standards. In time, however, websites began to signal problems with pre-sales (especially in July 2020) as the company responsible for distribution declared bankruptcy. Sites informed buyers how to receive a refund, while CDPR reassured them eventually everyone will receive the ordered copy. This prompted comments from journalists about how unusual the situation is, as "it is hardly normal for players to receive letters from the trustee" (105).

C01: Game Promotion; SC02: Ads

Shortly before *Cyberpunk 2077*'s release (October–December 2020), portals reported on several large-scale promotional events highlighting how enormous the whole campaign is. For example, a spot called *Seize the Day* was broadcast during the NBA Finals game between the Los Angeles Lakers and Miami Heat (October 2020). Journalists stressed actor Keanu Reeves' participation in *Cyberpunk 2077*, informing that Night City is full of opportunities and you can become almost anyone you want.

Other articles discussed a London bus with the game's promotional theme (here, journalists pointed out the November release date on the bus was outdated, as the premiere had already been postponed to December); a banner placed in Times Square in New York, for which CDPR had "allegedly paid $2.5 million" (135); and the broadcasting of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s premiere on the Polish TV channel Polsat Games.

C02: Promises; SC03: Multiplayer

The topic of a multiplayer mode for *Cyberpunk 2077* first appeared after the E3 Expo:

> We have learned that three projects are in development. One of them is, of course, *Cyberpunk 2077* itself. The other – focusing on the multiplayer mode – is being handled by a team of around 40 people in Wrocław. (024)

Initially, websites merely speculated about multiplayer, citing statements from the company's employees. Later (September 2019) the feature was confirmed, and subsequently (by November 2019) all portals became certain of its release, even reporting how would it be monetized. Journalists quoted CDPR Member of the Board and CFO Piotr Nielubowicz, who called multiplayer a "smaller project" (054) in the early stage of production. The articles disagreed on monetization, stating that "various options are being explored" (113), without specifying what these options are, but commonly invoking microtransactions Some were certain "multiplayer will receive microtransactions" (113), while others equivocated "it will most likely offer microtransactions" (122), adding these will not be aggressive, as the company does not want to annoy players.

In 2020 (January) journalists reported multiplayer was unlikely to be released in 2020 or even 2021, and that it would be postponed. This news differed from earlier reports about the mode being a "smaller project", now suggesting "CD Projekt RED is working on a GTA Online or even Destiny-style experience" (066). Such comparisons were often accompanied by emphasizing the producer's ambitious plans:

> The players are getting used to CD Projekt Red surprising them with unique and fantastic expansions and it will probably be no different when it comes to the online Cyberpunk. (…) [I]t is quite possible that no one will be surprised, when CDPR releases the online mode as a separate game, focusing only on the new generation consoles. (062)

C02: Promises; SC04: Mechanics

The first reports about mechanics (June 2019) discussed the possibility of playing *Cyberpunk 2077* without killing enemies, as the game would offer different ways to pacify or evade opponents, and that most weapons would receive a stun mode. The running theme in these articles was that CDPR as a company strongly values feedback from the gaming community and decisions on the gameplay and mechanics were made after "gathering fan feedback" (007).

The 2019 articles pointed out multiple weapon modifications, connecting weapon use with developing certain skills. This was highly praised, and all websites underlined CDPR's supposed attention to detail, "which will significantly affect the play experience" (028). Character development options were compared to *The Elder Scrolls* series, although it was stressed that the Polish company does not intend to "bother fans with some stupid rules and no one will have to jump all the time for their character

to be fit" (028). Again, it was emphasized that "CD Projekt RED has already proven many times that (…) it intends to improve its games through feedback". (037).

One of the key months for mechanics was July 2020, when websites reported on previously announced features being withdrawn from the final version. The first of these was running over walls, with some the journalists expressing disappointment this will not be included: "We can only hope that when exploring Night City, players will not feel that they are being somehow restricted" (099). However, there were also many positive assessments that removing certain features should not come as a surprise, as the producers are still putting "a lot of work into fine-tuning all aspects of the vibrant (…) Night City" (098).

Other reports mentioned simplifying the hacking minigame and removing subway travel and personalized vehicles. In the case of hacking, opinions from both disappointed and satisfied players were quoted. With subways, however, CDPR's announcements about their removal were not received positively:

> It looks like *Cyberpunk 2077* is still evolving, although not quite in the direction players would like it to. (…) [W]e have just learned that the use of Night City's subway will be heavily restricted and we won't see what was promised in promotional materials. (103)

Other articles concerning subways were similar, also showing players' hopes this feature will be included in the multiplayer mode. Nonetheless, the general tone was still very positive, and it was emphasized that resigning from many features is quite natural for the development of a game, and this particular game "already looks incredibly beautiful, as the latest footage confirms" (104).

C02: Promises; SC05: Sound

Concerning sound, press reports focused on particular artists and song releases. In July 2019, CDPR's collaboration with Swedish band Refused was announced with the artists incarnating SAMURAI, a band existing inside the game world. A lot of attention was devoted to the first song by SAMURAI/Refused, *Chippin' In*, and subsequent tracks were also commented. The articles were increasingly positive here, highlighting the effort going into music as more proof of the production's enormous scope.

In November 2020 some journalists focused on fans who were supposed to be "delighted with the sounds the Polish developers" presented (138). *No Save Point* by Run the Jewels' was called "strong" (137), appropriate to the upcoming "big premiere" (137) of *Cyberpunk 2077* and befitting its "gigantic story" (137). A lot of space was devoted to Claire Boucher (Grimes), who presented the *Cyberpunk 2077*-inspired music video *4ÆM*. The journalists stressed Elon Musk himself saw it and liked it, which "confirms the special status" of the whole production. The article did not consider Musk's interest may have been mostly due to Grimes being his life partner at that time.

C02: Promises; SC06: The Story

One of the most emphasized aspects of *Cyberpunk 2077* was the size and richness of the game world, the story itself, and the character of Johnny Silverhand, played by Keanu Reeves. Generally, websites reported on the audience's positive reaction to his involvement, promising lots of dialogues and stressing Johnny Silverhand's importance to the story.

In 2019 articles stressed many in-game romance options, including a large selection of characters to romance with and no pre-imposed sexual orientation of the main character. In narrative terms, *Cyberpunk 2077* was also compared to *The Witcher 3*, with the former supposedly presenting a much larger story. Many articles from 2019 presented other facets of the story, including three paths of the character's past to choose from – nomad, cyberpunk (both related to gangs), and corp (former corporate employee). These would give gamers three separate stories and affect the NPCs' perception of the player character, thus providing them with different sets of experiences. Here *Cyberpunk 2077* was compared to the Dragon Age series and *The Witcher 3*:

> *Cyberpunk 2077* will be radically different from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. It will be of an even larger scale, with a non-obvious futuristic world full of politics, and with moral choices neither easy nor obvious (…). (022)

According to reports, the scale and numerous choices in the story also meant that one would be able to play the game multiple times. Based on information from CDPR, articles claimed in-game dialogues would be sufficient to "fill two thick books" (059) and the game script "would take up eight thick volumes" (059). Another article described the production as "gigantic", after all "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt has shown that the Polish studio is perfectly capable of creating stories and game worlds" (057). Articles published shortly before the game's actual release (November 2020), again highlighted the game's length, suggesting a much larger scale than previously assumed, with hundreds of hours of possible play.

C03: Game Development; SC07: Performance

Journalists referred mainly to eighth-generation consoles, i.e Xbox One and PlayStation 4. However, as early as 2019, it was reported that the game will receive an "Xbox One X Enhanced" logo, indicating the extra work needed by the developers (improved resolution and framerate, better textures, etc.). Similarly, 4 K resolution was announced for PC and PS4 Pro versions. This news came from a response to a player's question on the official *Cyberpunk 2077* Facebook profile.

Articles repeatedly promised high performance, as *Cyberpunk 2077* would be "one of the last great-looking games of the current [eighth – authors' note] console generation" (045). To back this claim, journalists cited studio representatives stressing that "at the beginning of next year we will play several promising games, but it is

Cyberpunk 2077 that is expected to be of the best quality" (046). This narrative was consistent throughout the whole period analyzed, with later (January 2020) reports informing that the developers' priority is the eighth (still the current one at the time) generation of consoles and that the game would be its "culmination" (064).

This narrative stood even after the first reports on inaccuracies and doubts about the quality, as these were quickly replaced with positive materials. After the game's first delay (January 2020), journalists speculated that the reason could be a dismal Xbox One performance, although no source of this news was indicated. The websites quickly disavowed such reports. GRY-OnLine.pl, for example, referred to Cory Barlog (one of the creators of the God of War series) claiming that optimization, being the last step in the games' development process, makes low performance fully natural at this point. Finally, the speculations were cut by a widely-cited official statement by Philip Webber, a Narrative Director at CDPR, who dismissed reports on low performance, confirming Barlog's words.

The last relevant information was published just before the official release (November 2020). Citing the words of Adam Kiciński – the studio's CEO – journalists reported on the game's final performance: "at a conference call with investors organized by CD Projekt (…) the topic of console versions of Cyberpunk 2077 was raised. Company's executives claim that the game runs very well on PS4 and Xbox One" (142).

When looking at the pre-release period as a whole, one can see a very solid narrative, both by CDPR and the websites analyzed. *Cyberpunk 2077* was expected to deliver impeccable performance and run "brilliantly on every possible platform" (142) (on both eighth and ninth-generation consoles).

C03: Game Development; SC08: Delays

In January 2020 all websites informed about postponing the release to 17 September. CDPR's official statement informing about the need to polish the game was given as a reason:

> As we all know, *Cyberpunk 2077* is a very demanding work – it is a game from the creators of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, one of the best games of this generation (it is the game with the most "Game of the Year" awards). CD Projekt RED must live up to these high expectations. (067)

Nevertheless, as early as March 2020, the websites reported that the game is almost finished especially with the "sending of the production code to the rating agencies" (075). This is usually the final stage, although journalists did not give any official sources of this news. Instead, one could read of "a giant RPG, (…) with a chance of becoming the most important game of 2020 or even for the entire generation" (075). The portals stressed that the studio had no plans to postpone the September release even due to remote working during COVID-19 lockdowns.

The second delay was announced in June 2020 and the release was scheduled for November 19, emphasizing that "although the game is already complete for content, the developers need more time for testing, balancing gameplay mechanics and fixing bugs" (090). This is an important moment, with the first cracks appearing in the positive narrative surrounding *Cyberpunk 2077*, including the first articles about the studio's stock market declines. Some websites mentioned disgruntled players, and even gave examples of memes doubting the game's 2020 release. Nevertheless, journalists continued to reassure their readers everything was heading in the right direction, often relying on official CDPR communications. For example, in September and October 2020, one could read about the studio's impressive financial results and that there would be "no more delays of the game" (111):

> No more postponing of Cyberpunk 2077. CD Projekt RED has announced that the production has gone gold and has been sent to the pressing plant. Thus, the premiere of the game set for 19 November is in no danger. (120)

However, a month later (November 2020), the media reported the game's release would be postponed for a final time, invoking CDPR's official statement to that effect. The premiere was set for December 10, due to "the enormous amount of work involved in preparing and testing nine versions of the project, which is further complicated by the need to work remotely" (129).

The inconsistencies in these articles were not only about the release date itself and the reasons for delays, such as, e.g., remote work. Some conflicting reports were also about the working conditions at CDPR and the crunch, i.e., the need to increase the work intensity on a given project, which usually means working overtime to complete it on time (Cote & Harris, 2021). Shortly after E3 (June 2019), the journalist quoted Marcin Iwiński, co-founder of CDPR, who declared normal working conditions and avoiding crunch. Later on, however, the articles became less optimistic, indicating that although the studio was trying to limit overtime, it would be necessary as the game was in the final stages of production. This was confirmed in September 2020:

> CD Projekt Red has officially introduced a mandatory six-day work week until the release of Cyberpunk 2077, according to a Bloomberg report. In an interview, an anonymous employee revealed that some developers on the team have been working nights and weekends for more than a year. (115)

Here the narrative changed, especially as journalists recalled earlier CDPR's promises. In addition, further inconsistencies emerged over time (October 2020). At times websites reported that the crunch had been introduced with the consent of the majority of employees and had been debated before, while at other times that the employees had not agreed on it:

They said there had never been such a discussion on working overtime. One of them stated: "We received an email and then there was a meeting with the team leaders. There was no choice, we couldn't challenge it anyhow". (123)

C03: Game Development; SC09: Pre-Release Ratings and Reactions

The first reviews of *Cyberpunk 2077* were published on December 7 (3 days before the premiere), and all articles related to the game's PC version. Two of the analyzed websites rate games using a 10-point scale, and *Cyberpunk 2077* received 9.0/10 (GRY-OnLine.pl) and 9.5/10 (PPE).

All agreed on the positives, mentioning a strong main story, extensive side quests, a thrilling world, and interesting characters. Interestingly, the comments about the biggest problem – performance and glitches – were rather mild, as "no bug caused a decrease in the delight" (148). GRY-OnLine.pl and Eurogamer reported that the game may have needed yet another delay, while PPE stated that it still needs two or three updates. However, the overall reception was very positive, as "Cyberpunk 2077 proves that The Witcher 3 was no exception" (147). This unequivocally positive narrative was completely different from how the final product was received by consumers and what happened around *Cyberpunk 2077* after release, as we mentioned in the Introduction.

We will address the discrepancies between the first reviews and players' reactions in the next section. Here, it is worth noting that after the premiere, the analyzed portals also started to downgrade their ratings. PPE highlighted the poor quality of textures, drops in the game's fluidity, interface problems, and the game crashing on consoles. The final rating was 3.5/10. Similarly, GRY-OnLine.pl rated the product at 3.0.

Discussion

Content analysis shows that websites reported on the studio's numerous co-marketing collaborations, additional content, and surrounding products and major advertising events, stressing how unique the game and all the add-ons are. All this was used to argue the game would significantly raise the bar for the entire digital games industry, especially considering its large budget, marketing resources, and its enormous scale. Articles made – or rather, perpetuated – many promises about the game, including performance, release date, multiplayer mode, mechanics, soundtrack, and the overall shape and scale of the game world and storyline. Even when CDPR's backtracking was discussed, the overtones were very positive. It was emphasized that it is normal for promotional material to mention features that are later removed from the game, and that postponing the release is understandable and again: "normal". In summary, the narrative surrounding *Cyberpunk 2077* and the CDPR, was almost entirely positive. Not only did the portals compare the game to other highly rated titles, but repeatedly highlighted the company's previous successes, emphasizing its strength as a recognized brand. Overall, it can be said the articles were inducing hype in a manner discussed by Švelch (2017).

After the release, this changed drastically. As mentioned in the Introduction, the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077* failed in many ways. Just 2 days after the release, the analyzed sites reported that on Metacritic "the PC edition still managed to hold the ground, with an average user rating of 6.2/10, while for the consoles it's much worse. On PS4, it's a tragical 2.0/10, while the Xbox One edition scores only marginally better 2.5/10." (Werner, 2020). The consequences of underperformance were more serious. Dissatisfied gamers review bombed the game, and Sony decided to remove it from the PS Store offering refunds. Consumers and journalists reviewed the game negatively for many reasons. While some of the mechanics discussed earlier were indeed present, such as extensive options for creating a character, most were either underdeveloped or completely absent. For example, contrary to earlier reports, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s multiplayer mode did not materialize. Additionally, the option of playing without killing enemies was considered flawed (e.g., Buchalter, 2020), while the three storylines based on the initial player choice of nomad, cyberpunk, or corp background were seen as virtually identical and not changing much in terms of the overall experience (Tassi, n.d.). Promises about the scale of the story and the game's replayability were also found to be exaggerated. To make it even worse, reports of crunch and the pressure that studio executives were putting on staff to release the game in time soon escalated (see Schreier, 2021). In Poland, in January 2021, *Cyberpunk 2077* was under the scrutiny of the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection, and an investigation was launched on whether the CDPR will patch a game and make sure the refunding procedures are going smoothly. The title's negative reception and criticism of CDPR itself were widely reported by video game journalists (e.g., Hall, 2020; Isaac & Browning, 2020; Schreier, 2021).

Both the studio's marketing campaign and the messages coming from journalists add up to what we call "broken promises marketing" in the games industry. *Cyberpunk 2077* is a clear example here, as the pre-release communication was drastically different from how the game looked on premiere day and what was reported afterward. "Broken promises marketing" as we discuss it here results from the communicative relations of the various stakeholders in the videogame industry ecosystem, i.e., producers, game journalists, and the media in general, as well as the players themselves (see e.g., Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). These want to be informed and up to date, which fuels unverified media reports, mostly resulting from persuasive (promotional) efforts of the producers themselves. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the final result was doubtful, to say the least – the accumulated hype ended with a big disappointment for both players and journalists, and a major crisis within the company, with its reputation, significantly damaged. It must be stressed, however, that even at the moment of release, some journalists still seemed to be trapped in the positive narrative, initially rating the game very highly before downgrading their reviews in light of the broader backlash.

Cyberpunk 2077 thus demonstrates highly unethical actions from a business ethics perspective. In this regard, good practices in the games industry are shown by Harvainen et al. (2020) and Heimo et al. (2018), referring to Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism and Aristotelian virtue ethics, respectively. Although the

aforementioned studies are primarily concerned with free-to-play games and micro-payments, the conclusions can be applied to the games industry in general. At their core lays the belief that it is highly unethical to deceive audiences and claim that a game offers much more than it actually does. Taking this as a premise and referring to *Cyberpunk 2077*, we propose several ethical and professional communication practices for different stakeholders in the games industry. We make these recommendations separately for game journalists (or game media more broadly) and the producers, bearing in mind their mutual relations. In this case, being more ethical also means tackling the problems connected with "broken promises marketing":

Media 1: *Gaming journalists should not encourage buying additional content, especially before the game is released*. This was the case for *Cyberpunk 2077*, where the contents of the game's collector's edition and numerous products were openly praised. None of the articles were marked as sponsored suggesting no sponsorship was needed for the journalists to perpetuate the hype.

Media 2: Journalists should be more critical and reduce persuasion in favor of informing. The positive and emotional narrative in the analyzed articles resulted from excitement about the studio's previous successes, rather than concrete information about the current project. The hype was built up by frequent non-informative articles referring to CDPR and its previous games. Assuming the aim of good quality journalism is reporting facts, emotionally charged texts are inadvisable, especially for a product whose final shape is not yet known. Such messages put additional pressure on the developers, but also increase audience dissatisfaction in case of failure. Professional journalists should therefore maintain a critical approach and prioritize informing rather than building excitement.

Media 3: Pre-release reviews of games should consider different platforms, requesting additional review copies if necessary. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the poor performance on consoles was unknown, which resulted in significant discrepancies between the pre-release opinions of reviewers and the post-release opinions of gamers. While, from a media point of view, reviewing a Triple-A production before its release raises attention and website traffic, it can also lead to accusations of unreliability.

Producers 1. Announcing additional content before a game's release should be moderate. Here over-promising means high risk, especially for unreleased games.

Producers 2: Trailers should be considered as making promises to audiences and journalists, of how the game will look like, and not just as pure marketing. This has already been discussed earlier for *No Man's Sky*. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, websites commented on the studio's withdrawal from showing subway travel, a feature "promised" in the trailer. This was one of the few moments in the pre-release period when positively inclined sites became a little more cautious when commenting on the future game.

Producers 3. Producers should be more restrained in official communication. In the analyzed articles, journalists often relied on statements from CDPR, and some of these could even result in separate articles discussing the game's features and performance.

Producers 4: Communication should be planned to avoid ambiguity and overinterpretation by journalists. We believe that CDPR's communication strategy was generally flawed, as evidenced by various articles' inconsistencies (e.g., the multiplayer mode and microtransactions, game's performance). Communication was at times unplanned and reactive, which became evident when informing about the delays or crunch.

Producers 5: Producers should openly communicate the game's status for each platform. During the pre-release period, the studio maintained that the console versions offer high performance. Ultimately this resulted in accusations of deliberate lies about the game's condition before its release. While open and trustworthy communication about technical mishaps and problems can hurt sales, *Cyberpunk 2077* shows that reputation damage after concealing the game status can have equally harsh consequences. The game was pre-reviewed only in the PC version, which meant that the studio did not share reviewable console versions. Ultimately, if CDPR's intention in withholding console copies from reviewers was to conceal the problems to smooth out the game's release, the result was exactly the opposite.

The presented research has limitations. Although the portals we have included are among the most important video game media in Poland, these are "only" Polish-language sites. Many English-language press articles cited in this study indicate the way of informing about *Cyberpunk 2077* was similar worldwide, but research concerning other regions could shed new light on this particular case study, particularly given the Polish media's reporting on Poland's most significant game developer may have its biases. When writing about business ethics and reflecting on the producers-journalists/media relations, we do not consider many other factors that can differentiate these relations and also modify our recommendations, for example, cultural factors.

Finally, it should be noted *Cyberpunk 2077* is an action-adventure role-playing game. Genre influences not only the development process or target audiences but also the ways of attracting consumers and of building their relationship with a particular game or developer. Genre is not considered in our analysis; nonetheless, role-playing video games have a reputation for being one of the most challenging and time-consuming genres in terms of production (Qaffas, 2020). This is because players are usually free to explore a large and open world on their own terms and the choices they make should have their consequences, hence the potential for various bugs rises. In addition, modern role-playing video games often include a wide variety of activities for the player, including combat, exploration, solving puzzles, dialogues, item creation, etc., each of which requires an individual approach from the producers (Pepe, 2019). With all this, *Cyberpunk 2077* is a Triple-A game, with a big budget, above-average graphics, and a soundtrack. Therefore, the conclusions could be different for games of other segments and other genres. Research into different titles in the context of the relations between producers and video games media is therefore an obvious direction to continue the analyses presented here and can help further decipher these relationships in general.

Data Availability

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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