Crisis Communication in Gaming:
A Study on Blizzard Entertainment and Riot Games

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Abstract

The gaming scene is a developing market that has grown exponentially, while a brand like Blizzard Entretainment used to be a top dog, it seems to has losts its footing. The company has faced a lawsuit on top of recent products underperforming. These two issues stand as a factor as to why they have declined in recent time. A brand that has since risen is Riot Games, similarly a few years back they faced issues similar to the ones Blizzard have now. The thesis explores the different facets and roles that play into why this switch might have happened and what corrective steps could be taken.

The thesis hopes that with the research found it can serve as a framework and examples for companies in the game industry both small and big as to how to handle crises and handle its community. The work takes aspects of critical realism, using qualitative data to express the information in an ethical way, while having a constructivist approach. The thesis uses netnography as well as secondary data to gather information for the problem, it then uses three different theories to gain a better understanding. The three theories used are consumer culture theory,Kellers brand equity model, and Image restoration theory. After the research was conducted the results showed that there was a market shift, this was in correlation to the various themes from the lawsuit and the products released. This was in due to how the community responded across social media platforms. In this specific scenario of lawsuits regarding harassment in the workplace, it resulted that corrective action tended to create the more positive outcome and outweighing reducing offensivness.

To conclude the data found would suggest that crisis teams are a very valuable asset for companies to have, not only during crisis but for prevention. This team can create a better corporate message and more concise. On top of this understanding your community and how it fits into your brand have an important aspect, if you cannot produce products they enjoy and you have issues in the company it creates issues.The conclusion should serve as to global markets in video games and the pre-caution they should have with a crisis team as well as some suggestions on handling it.

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Introduction

This thesis will investigate the dynamics and changes that have occurred in the last decade in the online gaming market in which Blizzard, a much bigger company at the start of the past decade has now been surpassed by Riot who at that time was still growing. More specifically the thesis will focus on the culture of the two companies including their communication with customers following similar issues companies faced. By looking at this communication and branding they each employed. The thesis will hope to identify the shift in market dominance. These companies are two global players who gather a lot of attention in countries all over the world. As the market continues to grow countries are getting more and more interested in hosting gaming events as well as adding gaming events to big world occurrences like the Olympics. This international dimension is important to the case even if both of the headquarters of these companies are in America.

Blizzard was founded in 1991 by Allen Adham, Michael Morhaime, and Frank Pearce, a company that at first focused on producing games for other companies while they learned and grew in the field so that they could eventually do as they wanted. The company continued to grow and they began to get recognition when they released Diablo in 1997 they would continue with success after success from there onwards creating StarCraft in 1998 which would become the PC top-selling game of that year. But more importantly what it made was essentially the birth of esports, which created an entirely new culture that would develop in the years to come nowadays being an insanely massive market. Following that the pillar on which Blizzard became to be a leader in gaming was made, Warcraft III this real-time strategy game brought forth the settings and characters that would later develop into the most famous massively multiplayer online game and Blizzard's biggest title - World of Warcraft. The game was released in 2004 and was a phenomenon.

The game became the fastest-selling PC game in the United States, and in 2005 it reached 1.5 million subscribers on the monthly payment service the game(Curtis,2011). Something that at the time was unheard of. Its success for it kept growing and growing and in 2007 the game reached over 9 million subscribers and created over one billion dollars in revenue since being released. It was estimated that in 2008 the category of MMOs held 62% of the subscription market in gaming(Whippey, 2011). This would be a landmark for Blizzard that would later bring things to a more personal setting and first of its kind when they began holding an in-person convention once a year called "BlizzCon" this would be a celebration of everything Blizzard does. The company would continue to prosper and deliver great intellectual property from hits such as hearthstone and overwatch both garnering great success.

This was until 2018 that the company began to have a lot of shortcomings and issues both within their games and on the company management side. Issues with lawsuits, sexual

harassment, and failed and poorly reviewed products all began to pile up. One of the biggest issues that arose was in 2021 when the state of California filed a lawsuit regarding the "Frat Boy" culture. An example is " the pervasiveness of what the lawsuit dubbed "cube crawls," where male employees got drunk, crawled their way through cubicles, and participated in "inappropriate behavior toward female employees." (Greenbaum, 2022) This was one of many findings after a two-year investigation. This is compiled with constant delays of games being pushed back years sometimes and the release of bad content set them back. In 2016 Blizzard released the movie Warcraft based on their best-selling game and it got horrendous reviews. "But having sat through this baffling movie's grueling two hours, I can't in good conscience even recommend it to Warcraft devotees. There's nothing here for anyone—neither man nor orc." (Lawson, 2016) stated Richard Lawson after watching the film, this was one of many bad reviews.

Riot was established in 2006 by Brandon Beck and Marc Merrill, they came up with new ideas that at the time seemed absurd to investors but it has now become the forefront of a lot of products. The biggest shift in ideology that Riot pitched at the time was to shift from new game releases and sequels that would release every few years to a completely new model - a free-to-play model. This model was a big risk as it was yet to be unproven, but it was a massive success. The idea came from their game League of Legends, A game they created based on a mod of Warcraft III. The game was a MOBA and the free-to-play aspect was a giant draw in the beginning when the game launched in 2009. "By 2014, when the team arrived at a fortnightly update release schedule, it had 67 million monthly active users, more than double its 2012 audience of 32 million monthly players."(GLHF, 2021) The game increasingly got bigger and bigger with each year up until now where they have over 150 million users. (Galov, 2022)

One of the biggest things that came out of League of Legends was its competitive scene, taking upon Blizzard's concepts and spinning it their own way. Creating support systems for the teams and an ecosystem that allows players from varying regions to gain a spot at competing. The competitive scene blossomed and in its latest irritation had a peak viewing of four million people (excluding Chinese viewership) (Daniels, 2021) and had a prize pool of over two million dollars.

Similarly to Blizzard, Riot faced issues with sexual harassment as well as lawsuits.

"like many of Riot Games' female employees, Plaintiffs have been denied equal pay and found their careers stifled because they are women. Moreover, Plaintiffs have also seen their working conditions negatively impacted because of the ongoing sexual harassment, misconduct, and bias which predominate the sexually-hostile working environment of Riot Games." - Lawsuit Riot v California , 2018

On top of this Riot has dealt with various community issues such as partnering up with Saudi-Arabia in their esports scene as sponsors as well as behind the scenes holding a tight grip

on how they want things to be told. This hinders and backlash on a lot of its talent as they try to not let anyone grow bigger than them and gain power.

Unlike Blizzard, though Riot has not seen the same backlash, this thesis will further investigate what different steps and things each company has done that have made them have a different outcome. The problem that the thesis will explore is what are the differences and similarities in branding strategies between Blizzard and Riot and how they deal with issues relating to their brands like sexual harassment, lawsuits, and community issues. By looking into this an explanation could arise as to why Riot is seen in a more positive light than Blizzard in a consumer's eye in 2022.

Literature Review

<u>Gaming Business models</u>

Over time the gaming business models have developed and changed, from selling only physical fully finished products to now overtime selling digital products that could be in development. Early in the gaming era, all games had to come from some form of memory storage (disc, USB drives, floppy discs, etc). There was no other way to attain them otherwise. Because of this, games that were developed always had to ship as a final product. This would mean that if there were issues or bugs they would be unfixable. On top of this, it created extra steps in production and made the cost higher.

Generally, the way the business model works would be in a system of development, production, software management, and finally distribution. This is the general framework and the one predominantly when it comes to physical sales. The development is where research is made on the game and it begins to bring ideas forward of what it will be. The production stage is when the developers begin to make it. This is the longest part of the process as it can take years to fully make games, especially back when there were only physical products and hence no alterations could be made. Next is software and license management. This part is all about securing the rights and protection of the product. This could be from licensing the game engine or even characters in the game. On top of contacting the different manufacturers and settling deals on how the game would be sold and on which console/platform.

Lastly is the distribution, we can break this down into separate eras. The previous and most expensive way was physical retail sales. The content as stated before would be a one-time transaction and the player would play the product and then repeat the cycle with new games releasing. In this model "the developer/publisher would sacrifice an estimated 25% of revenue to the retailer while incurring greater costs related to physical packaging and distribution." (Perotta, 2020)

As technology advanced and more game studios came to be, there was a shift. Companies needed a way to cut out the retailer and go directly to the customer. Luckily the advancement of the internet would create that opportunity. The gaming industry came up with their own digital

storefronts that would cut out the time for both parties and make it more accessible to everyone. Now customers would be able to purchase the product from the comfort of their homes and start downloading it. "To highlight the disruption of this digital shift, in 2009, digital sales made up only 20% of overall video game sales in the US; in 2019, it made up over 80% of all US game sales." (Perotta, 2020) This would then allow for the entire model to begin to adapt and change. Digital stores that no longer required the high cost of distribution meant that a lot of smaller companies would come into play and way more content was being made overall.

But the biggest change that created benefits and issues that arose from this was being able to change the product after release. Companies could release unfinished products to consumers and over time change and/or add more into the game. This was exciting as people could get their hands on things early, but it could also be negative with all the unfinished work. This would also work similarly for companies as they could test the game out with the public and gain some money early on in development, but it could have a backlash and lose money if the game came out in a bad state.

Currently, in its early stage,s a new model is coming to form and change the gaming industry as well, that being the subscription-based one. This takes the latest iteration of games being unfinished or releasing earlier in production than before and puts an annual or monthly cost behind it. "Live services-focused games are developed to live on long past their initial release by providing players with fresh content on a frequent basis. Currently, these games are being monetized through microtransactions (e.g. season passes), creating an easy transition towards a true subscription model." (Perotta, 2020) This means that games would have evolved long from the cycle buying phase of single purchase and single product and do all over again. This would be a commitment that over time that game gets more developed and content added. It would also mean that the constant price for a game would disappear and rather it be subscription-based where you have to pay a certain amount at a given interval, similar to how Netflix works.

In regards to the companies being examined in the thesis, Blizzard for a long time was still devoted to physical products with all launches while also offering digital sales. This gave the opportunity for consumers to enjoy both but ultimately has pushed people towards the digital marketplace. They have tried different transaction models in games and were one of the first on a subscription model with world of warcraft, where consumers had to pay each month to play the game. This would mean that over time if people lost interest they would need to put more money in just to give it another try, if not they were locked out of content they previously had purchased.

On the other hand, Riot has only had a digital storefront, where all their games have been free. They rely heavily on microtransactions and a similar subscription service but one that offered in-game items rather than access to the actual game. This trend is the current norm for games and it is usually called a "battle-pass" or "season-pass", where every couple of months you would need to repurchase to get the goods.

Microtransactions

As explained by Tomic, "microtransactions denote a payment when purchasing an application for a mobile phone or additional content in video games. Although most microtransactions are low-amount payments, they can be said to be determined primarily by purpose, not by the amount"(Tomic, 2020 p 18). Microtransactions have three different forms, DLC (downloadable content), pay to win/time, and cosmetics. Originally it was "adopted by indie studios, fighting thus against the more potent competition of publishers. After some time, the publishers themselves have changed business policy and started to rely on microtransactions"(Tomic, 2020 p 18). These microtransactions changed how the companies would look at games, it created a new constant source of revenue instead of the basic exchange of paying upfront for all the content. These microtransactions were a big success albeit some of them were seen in a negative way.

The first form of DLC was something that had been around for some time, creating new stories, characters, and general content for an already released product and extending its life cycle. These would generally be more expensive than the two other forms of microtransactions but also required more time from developers as they would create more long-form content for the product. Examples of this could be seen in the Bioshock series, where they released three different DLC each uncovering new backstories to the main story, as well as adding hours of new content to the game. This could also massively change the game such as Undead Nightmare DLC for Red Dead Redemption where it turned the cowboy western game into a western zombie game.

Blizzard's World of Warcraft has had seven DLCs since launch, each adding a lot of new content both from changing the game systems, adding new content, and upgrading with each release to fit new technology. These changed over time first being physical only and now being digital as the easiest way to obtain them.

Next and easily the most controversial microtransaction-pay to win/time. These microtransactions are ones that give the consumer an advantage over others who do not possess them. This can range from more lives in a game, stronger items in the games, or just overall priority and "VIP" status that is unattainable no matter how much time someone else puts in. This type of microtransaction tends to create "whales" people who spend an absurd amount of money to be ahead and do so constantly. In a recent interview David 'Siigari' Pietz talked about what it was like being a "whale" and how he would spend over $20,000 in the last five years on these microtransactions. (Hood, 2017)

While originally this was a mobile game feature, it soon ported over to mainstream gaming. Games such as APB and Neverwinter are prime examples of communities dealing with these pay-to-win transactions and how the communities tend to be so small because of the monetary investment needed to remain relevant. Looking at reviews online from reddit you come across statements such as "unplayable if you didn't drain your wallet."(Minty Chu, 2018) as time has developed you don't see this trend continuing as it alienates players.

The most common form of microtransactions you see in gaming today is cosmetics. These microtransactions alter how the game looks or even what a player carries and can "show off" to others, it does not affect gameplay at all, unlike the others. The most common form of this apart from single item purchasing is battle/season passes. Various games around the industry now follow this battle/season pass structure as it is a recurring opportunity to make a profit. "In February 2018, it is estimated that *Fortnite* sold over 5 million Battle Passes on the first day of their 3rd season, earning approximately $50M in revenue." (Perotta, 2020) These passes contain different cosmetic items and objects for the player to equip. The battle pass format is one that Riot has put into most of its products ranging from their biggest product in League of Legends to the newest in Valorant.

Cosmetic microtransactions can vary from being able to directly buy the item or battle pass to a random loot box mechanic. The loot box mechanic creates rarity and a form of gambling, as you spend money hoping to get a certain item from the box but the items are not weighted the same as the outcome. Games like Overwatch (a Blizzard product) use this tactic in order to attain any item. It puts it all to chance and can be quite the money sink for anyone looking for a specific outcome.

As microtransactions change people's perception does as well. This is important in relation to both Blizzard and Riot as they both have different systems in place. In certain countries around the world, they have begun creating restrictions on microtransactions. In France, any form of loot box now has to pass several checks in order to not be set as gambling. Odds must be listed and different checkmarks set in order to protect the consumer. Considering how massive microtransactions are in the gaming ecosystem, making sure to not cross any boundaries in the people's view is important.

Content creators and video games

In today's ecosystem, people are always looking for others' opinions online, always searching to see what others say about products and businesses. This is seen in gaming, from online reviews to even content creators who upload videos talking about the products. In a study in Finland, they found that "The results of the study indicated that the consumers of esports and review game video content are likely to make game-related purchases" (Vahlo, 2020 p 2723). This study looked at how content creator videos affected consumers. There was a theory that watching videos would stop the purchasing, as they would get the experience that way. In fact quite the opposite, it promoted sales and helped sell more. This means that content creators are key in the 21st century for companies that want to get an edge when selling games.

To put into perspective how important content creators are for the gaming ecosystem, they are the gateway for new audiences.

"A Google Consumer Survey fielded in October 2014 of people who said they watch gaming videos on YouTube revealed that only a portion of this group (37%) considers

themselves "gamers." When asked about their motivations for watching gaming videos, viewers mentioned "entertainment" and "humor" as often as they mentioned "learning" (Gautam, 2014)

This shows that even those who still don't consider themselves gamers get invested in products by engaging with this community. This has now created new connections between the creators and the companies but ultimately this can lead to a lot of gray areas. From businesses pushing for creators to force a certain "story" for the game to even unethical promotion of gambling games to younger audiences.

The content creators hold a strong hand in what games are being played and talked about, this shows when even small indie games can blow up overnight just by a big content creator playing the game. An example is the game "Among Us" the game was released in 2018 but it wasn't until 2 years later that it became a giant hit."The game had been building a small yet loyal following for more than two years before it shot into the spotlight thanks to Twitch streamers," (Nelson, 2020) Once these streamers/content creators got a hold of it, the game "has seen more than 158 million installs worldwide across the App Store and Google Play to date", (Nelson, 2020)

The impact seems to keep growing as the platforms content creators use almost doubled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Going forward companies both small and big will find ways to get more involved with content creators and how it can publicly impact the image of their game. In relation to Blizzard and Riot, they constantly use content creators to generate hype around events and games, there sometimes could be some hesitation as content creators aren't always brand-friendly and that can impact public perception.

Theory

Consumer Culture Theory

The consumer culture theory created by Arnould and Thompson summarizes "It aims to unravel questions of how and why exchange and consumption happen in particular ways; the implications of marketplace production, exchange, and consumption for society and culture; and, to critique and offer solutions to the dilemmas imposed by global consumer culture."(Arnould, 2019 p 6) The consumers of each culture while separate still share some traits even if they differ in others. This theory tries to uncover the meanings of consumption and all its dynamics. From a consumer culture theory culture is seen"as a dynamic network of boundary spanning material, economic, symbolic, and social relationships or connections" (Arnould, 2019 p 7)

Western cultures are seen to value consumption to a great effect and according to Killbourne "the consumption of market made commodities and desire-inducing commercialized symbols are central to consumer culture"(Arnould, 2019 p 7) This means that the value comes from the chance to consume as much as possible from as many goods as available. It creates a very materialistic setting, where items and possessions trump all. These ideals can vary

differently in other cultures and in a global market with competitors worldwide the shifts in attitudes change.

Understanding consumer culture theory goes beyond what originally was intended of " the "epistemic goal of making incremental contributions to a system of verified propositions" weakly linked to what living consumers think and do".(Arnould, 2019 p 7) The unified theory evolves to create a mesh of societies and cultures that shape consumption and globalized markets. Instead of trying to create a predictive outcome with this data, consumer culture theory rather looks at an interpretive perspective trying to describe experiences. These experiences in consumerism are always affected by socio-cultural and historic contexts that delve into the aspects of why people value things as they do and how they spend.

An important context of consumer culture theory is that apart from the homogenized groups of just say a nation ex: USA, Denmark. It breaks it down into further groups and subgroups to further break down the shared meanings and aspects in these communities. Material objects and consumption of different products have meaning behind it, they can showcase different values and structures of the culture. Examples of this would be how a subculture of computer enthusiasts are currently in high demand of graphic processing units, having the latest and most expensive one is a giant talking point and seen positively. They have been drastically affected by the chip shortage due to the pandemic. This has then altered the community more than anything as they now must find trades within each subgroup. While on the more populous culture of each nation there is not much of a conversation about this chip shortage and no mention of graphic processing units. This showcase into subgroups can further explain different phenomena that occur in the world.

Arnould and Thompson further delve that there are four domains that contribute to consumer culture theory. The first looks at the individual category where products shape the identity of the individual. Following that is the group aspect which it looks at marketplaces and how it affects the culture. The next step up is the cross-dimensional part that looks at society and how it interacts with other groups. Lastly is the macro stage that "addresses consumers' strategies of interpreting mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and discourses" (Arnould, 2019 p 8)

Individual categories can be exemplified easily as simple as buying merch for something you support on a wider scale such as what type of car you purchase. In today's standard buying a Tesla is much different than buying a Prius, they offer different subgroups and cultures and really make for different identities. This tells a bit about possibly the buyer's interests and their socio-economic status. They offer different experiences in day-to-day as well, where Teslas have special places they must go to refuel and are much higher-end than a regular gas station for a Prius. It all creates different lifestyles and different contexts for consumerism.

The group aspect using the above example to continue explaining how the theory can be viewed goes as follows. Being a part of the Tesla subgroup means you get access to new marketplaces and exclusivity, this group also can generally be seen as more wealthy. A certain

reputation can come within the subgroup and can create a much more diverse culture where new things are initiated and appreciated.

The cross-dimensional level can vary greatly. Buying a Tesla has its perks of being involved in certain prestigious private groups, but it can create issues. This consumption depending on the culture and group can be viewed positively in a consumeristic focused culture or as an excess of wealth and showing off for a non-materialistic subgroup. This affects culture as it can create more prestige or a wider gap of connection between communities.

The last area covers the macro, this goes on a global market scale. It will look to further explain global strategies and ideas that cover more than small subgroups and how they can best interact with each part. In an example of Tesla, it no longer looks at the small but rather what is the next big steps and how can they implement them worldwide in all the different subcultures. This is tricky as it becomes very complex with all the different opinions and concerns that would be affected. In a global context finding the perfect fit doesn't always look the same in each region.

Kellers Brand Equity model
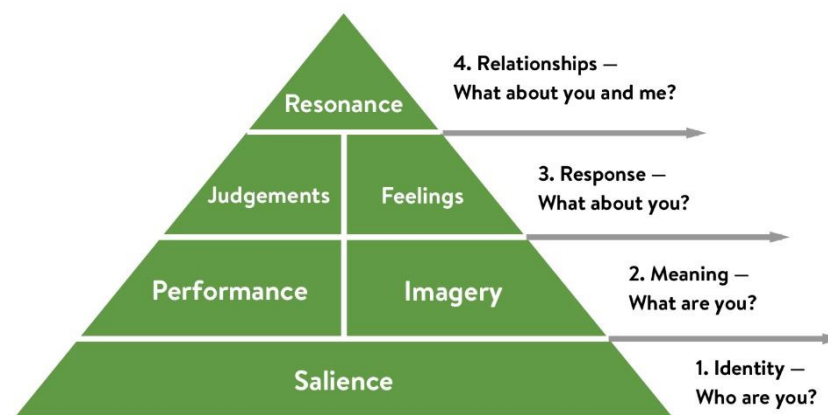
(Hawker, 2019)

This pyramid model is divided into 4 different steps- identity, meaning, response, and relationships. Each sector targets an area of branding and images that if done correctly will create a strong brand, but an ideal brand image as well. With this base, it will leave customers with positive feelings and experiences, which would lead to further potential transactions. This would create positive brand equity that will help grow the brand and doing so will create a connection with the customers that they can spread to others. Some of the sectors have split parts to further

distinguish factors that need to be addressed. In relation to existing companies, you can correlate where an aspect is lacking and create a disconnect with the customer.

The base of the pyramid is Identity, this correlates to brand salience. Brand salience is defined as "the degree to which your brand is thought of or noticed. Strong brands have high Brand Salience and weak brands have little or none. Without brand salience, people would not choose your brand at the moment of truth." (Ipsos Encyclopedia, 2017 p1). The way your brand is referred to and seen can make a massive difference in if a consumer chooses you or not. The identity is key to setting up the rest of the pyramid because if this part is missing or weak the other pieces fail to attract positive brand equity.

Things that affect brand identity and shape it are how the company responds and are they consistent. If they fall short in being consistent it breaks the trust that would be there and if the company's response to customers is negative it leads to a weak brand. The two last elements are authenticity with the brand and the story the company conveys. In a survey done in 2019 Stackla shared that "A whopping 90% of consumers said that authenticity is important when deciding which brands they like and support"(DeGruttola, 2019). Consumers don't want to be deceived, the false stories and marketing ploys push them away. They want realistic responses from the company and real connections not based on false authenticity.

The following step up is meaning, this part is also divided into two spaces- performance and imagery. Performance relates to how satisfied is your customer with your products and are their needs being met. While the imagery is about your brand's social currency, which relates to how the company is seen in the public's eye.

Performance for a product can be simplified to price, style, reliability, and features. The price point is whether it holds up to either the high end of the cost or the low end and if the consumer feels the price matches what they are paying for. If they get what they feel is fair or a bargain that helps the company, but if it seems costly for what it is it will be negative for the meaning of the brand. The style and features can be combined so that the consumer wants it to look good and have things that make it stand out. They want to be proud of what they bought and be effective and useful. Underdelivering here makes the company unattractive to consumers as they want to avoid a product that is not appealing. Lastly is reliability, they need for the product to work and do so well. It diminishes not only the product but the perception of the company if it is faulty.

The imagery really defines whether the company is sending out messages and images that people can latch on to and how they react. Positive imagery would create connections with the consumer that makes them appeal to the product and want to get involved. It makes it easy to recommend. Negative makes consumers disassociate and ignore the brand completely because of the distaste.

The meaning is what the company not only represents of itself but what meaning others place on it. The two distinct factors set the blocks to continue creating stronger brand equity, this equity is what helps determine the standing of the brand and the company itself.

The third sector of this pyramid is the response, similarly, to the previous block, it has to do with consumers and what it evokes out of them. Splitting it into two the area becomes judgments and feelings. Judgments relate more to the perception of people who use your products, this ties in with feelings that arise from this association. How do consumers feel about others when they see them using/wearing your product. Do they make assumptions that relate to the story you are trying to tell? If it's a sports company and you want it to signify they get an athlete vibe from wearing your product, is it doing so? You don't want this impression to misalign or create a disconnect from the original message.

At the top of the pyramid sits relationships, which rely on resonance. Resonance is defined as "a quality that makes something personally meaningful or important to someone" (Britannica Dictionary, 2022) by making it meaningful it matters to the person. They relate to it and have a connection, that connection can mean brand loyalty and a long-term customer. This is the hardest level for a brand to attain, hence why it is at the top of the pyramid. At this stage, the customer has invested a lot into the brand and are advocates for the company, as they speak highly of it and how often they represent it. This is ideal for the company and brand as they will have become engrained in the customers day to day ultimately cementing them as loyal. This is not to say that cannot change, as if any of the bottom parts fall apart during or after the customer can lose confidence and revert to other stages or even completely abandon the company.

This theory will be used to analyze both Riot and Blizzard, reviewing their different branding and what steps have been different, and the outcomes of it. This theory implements an understanding of branding and can help point out issues such as responses from the companies as well as how the branding relates to the consumers.

Image Restoration Theory

Image restoration theory relates to how a corporate crisis should be handled and its different facets. Benoit clarifies there are five broad categories that pertain to image repair for when a crisis comes. These are as follows, denial, evasion of responsibility, reduce responsibility, corrective action, and mortification. Following this, the theory develops into three stages before the crisis, identification of crisis, and coping with the crisis.

The first category is denial, this can be seen in two variants shifting blame and denial outright. In shifting blame this is placing the crisis and the issues that arose from it onto another party, and the company tries to cut ties with the issue. By doing so the company would no longer be at fault and this would not ruin its image. The other variant is denial, Benoit states that denial is when"A firm may deny that the act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone. "(Benoit, 2018). This tries to contradict the crisis from ever being part of the company's fault.

The following category is the evasion of responsibility, this strategy can be further broken down into four sectors. The first is that the company can say the action they took was a response because of some other incident that happened out of their control. This would be seen as a

reasonable action from the company rather than outlandish. The next option is defeasibility this is when "the business alleges a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation"(Benoit, 2018). Lacking the information creates a logic that the issue was due to misinformation rather than purposely. The third option is that the company did so by accident rather than on purpose. If they can persuade the audience that it was unintentional then they will be less responsible. Lastly is that the company always had good intentions even if it all did not go to plan. So if there were any issues the company would never do any harm to its customers and they should not worry about the issues. All of these examples completely rid the company or lessen the responsibility the company would garner from the crisis.

Reducing offensiveness is the third category Benoit covers, this relates to trying to downplay the incident and bolster themselves. The companies can take six different actions, the first is to try and maximize the positive feelings the company brings to customers. Bringing up things from the past or the positive actions they have made in order to cancel out the negativity. The subsequent action is trying to minimize the negative emotions of the act, this would mean that they downplay the facts and negativity that came from the crisis to make it appear not as grandiose as different crises can appear to be to the consumer. An example given by Benoit is that of Exxon when data came out that thousands of animals were killed by oil, the company came out and stated that according to their data it was only a few hundred not thousands. The third action is trying to explain differentiation in issues, where the action is explained in a matter that is normal rather than an issue. This would be like an item being broken and it rather being explained that it needs usual maintenance. Fourth is by being transcendent where it tries to out weight the bad with the good, given that testing on animals can be harmful but claiming that it is worth it to benefit humans overall and be safe. Fifth pertains to attacking the accusers, this is going against those who tore down your image and criticizing them. This works to reduce the incoming damage and place a light on the accuser and the issues they could have. Lastly is compensation, this act is offering monetary gain or reward to the victims in order to try and create a solution. This would help the company's image as it would try to affect those who they hurt and try to make amends. An example could be donating to a charity for a good cause that your crisis damaged.

Benoit's fourth idea is corrective action, as he puts it "the company promises to correct the problem. This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act." (Benoit, 2018) This states that they acknowledge the issue and are making changes to fix it or amend it. To demonstrate this you can take a look at a data company that has its servers hacked. They would then own up to the problem and say that they will be building new servers that are more protected and they will invest x amount of money into doing so. Therefore trying to amend the wrongdoing and prevent it in the future.

Finally is Mortification, this is where the company confesses to the wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness. While this could be the most direct and honest way, it has its drawbacks as it could invite further crises and or lawsuits from victims. To explain further take into account

someone who sells a defective product, this product then harms someone. If the company comes out and accepts blame and asks for forgiveness it could be accepted or it could be used against them for other parties to gain from.

After exploring the five categories for image repair in crisis, Benoit's theory tries to give an insight into how to handle the situations beforehand or the system that should be in place. This system can be split into three main categories: before the crisis, identification of the nature of the crisis, and finally suggestions for coping with them. This helps a company to then be more prepared and ready to handle these issues.

The first cycle is before the crisis, this is where teams hopefully can see the crisis coming or be prepared for any that could arise. From stepping in and preventing issues from getting out or even beginning and reducing response time. If the company has a team/person in this position they can avoid looking even worse when the crisis begins, "This person should also anticipate potential crises and prepare contingency plans. Although crises can take a variety of forms, some potential crises can be anticipated." (Benoit, 2018) these plans set a framework and can be adjusted as things develop.

The second cycle revolves around the identification of a crisis, this relates to the when what, who, and how of it all. First finding out when the incident happened and who was affected. The audiences of a company can vary greatly from stakeholders, workers, and consumers but "It is vital to clearly identify the salient audience(s). A key part of persuasion is tailoring one's message(s) to the audience." (Benoit, 2018) In different situations it can be better to target messaging to one audience over the other, but it is key to realize to not leave anyone behind. The crisis also varies greatly on what it is and how it happened, because that would help target better how it handles the issue and how to communicate it. These different steps narrow down how to possibly control the issue.

The final cycle is the effective image restoration techniques and how to use them and/or balance them. The important distinction is that this is a form of persuasion and that can change dramatically from a different group to group on how it should be handled. Generally, some guidelines to follow with persuasion are "avoid making false claims; provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign; avoid arguments that may backfire" (Benoit, 2018). It is advised that companies who are at a fault should not waste time and be straightforward and admit when it happens. "Apart from the fact that this is morally the correct thing to do, attempting to deny true accusations can backfire. An organization that falsely denies responsibility for offensive actions risks substantially damaged credibility if the truth emerges" (Benoit, 2018). There have been cases where even those who admit to wrongdoing can be seen as innocent and it provides a healthier relationship with all parties involved. In terms of defending themselves and correcting the issue is always encouraged. Customers want to know that even after the issues the company can be trusted.

"While people frequently want to know whom to blame, it is more reassuring to know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems. A firm commitment to correct the

problem - repair damage and/or prevent future problems - can be a very important component of image restoration discourse." (Benoit, 2018)

Combining all the above-mentioned steps and actions means that multiple strategies are viable, and can be adjusted on a per-issue and per audience crisis. While the persuasion can not always be 100% as there are so many factors, implementing the gives the company a decent opportunity to either avoid issues with crises or protect their image. This theory lays the groundwork that can be adapted to different regions of the world. The globalized companies can use it but must be sure that adapt to each different culture and subgroup if it is to succeed. Knowing the audience and following the different actions can sometimes fix an issue entirely, but a mishandling could ruin the reputation of the company for years to come. This theory will combine with the Riot and Blizzard case as we look at how both companies have faced similar issues around the same time frame and how each handled it.

Methodology

This part of the thesis will delve into the theory of science/research paradigm that the thesis will focus on. The theory of science according to Guba and Lincoln (1989) is split up into four factors: epistemology, methodology, ontology, and axiology. For the thesis to fully expand on the question posed of "what are the differences and similarities in branding strategies between Blizzard and Riot and how they deal with issues relating to their brands like sexual harassment, lawsuits, and community issues." it is essential that all aspects of the research paradigm are present in the thesis. This allows for all the elements of the paradigm to create a valid and correct thesis.

The thesis will look to express these four aspects of research shown below.
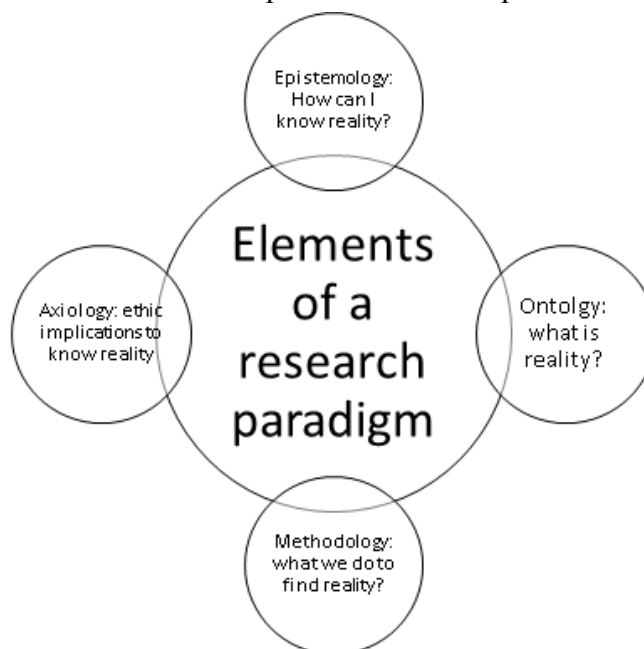
This paradigm aligned with critical realism, the point of view that the thesis will also partake in. Critical realism " One of the most important tenets of CR is that ontology (i.e. what is real, the nature of reality) is not reducible to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality). Human knowledge captures only a small part of a deeper and vaster reality." (Fletcher, 2017) Having to grasp reality from each individual and its different experiences is important for lookin at cultures. Researching for the thesis it should be clear that the information found is based on the instruments used during the research, meaning a combination of objectivity and subjectivity inherently.

Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the "possibility, nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge" (Jupp 2006, p 92)." Epistemology tries to tackle the idea of one's own reality and trying to find what it is. The thesis would take a stance of critical realism, as the opinions and realities of the data and how one can perceive it can be up to interpretation but some natural things do have explanations. This relates that the meaning of the research with critical realism is dependent on what is found with some general understandings that are accepted. The thesis explore how the phenomenon of the change in branding between the two companies of Blizzard and Riot through the interpretation of data found. The phenomenon hopes that it can find a correlation to why the brands have gone in such different ways. In this area, the thesis will look at how different global cultures have been affected by the issues and communication that arose from the companies and the interpretation of their brand.

Ontology

Ontology talks about what is reality, trying to find what each person's reality could be like. If it is objectivism-based or constructionism-related. Objectivism ontology correlates to all humans sharing an exact reality, this would mean everyone perceives things the same way. It can be seen as simple as red being the color red for everyone or a flavor all being the exact same and everyone experiences it the same way. In constructivism, it means that each person has their own reality of how things are and it is shaped by each own experience. This thesis will take on a constructivist approach, as the paper will look at qualitative data. This data can vary greatly depending on people's reality and culture meaning that it is not a shared reality.

Axiology

Axiology simply described is speaking about the ethics behind the research and what implications it could have, not just for the outcome but for those involved. The way data is represented and acquired means that there are different interactions at play. These interactions ultimately have to be ethically okay to do so, invading anyone's rights should never be done in research studies like these. Because most of the data being used will be secondary data it is

important to disclose where it was attained as well as represent it in a valid way. This data should cite where it was attained so as to not steal anyone's work and be ethical.

Methodology

The methodological framework and data will all be qualitative, which means that it puts a focus on trying to "better understand how and why people do what they do, and what kinds of meaning they ascribe to different behaviors." (Zhang, 2021) Because the thesis focuses on something that is not necessarily able to be represented in numbers and it goes more with explaining a phenomenon with experiences people have and how it affected the companies. The advantage of this is that it will help delve further into the communities and subgroups affected by the observation in the thesis, rather than simplifying it down. The research question talks about a shift and how branding and crisis affect that, this means that delving deeper into the ideas and perceptions that consumers have is keen to detect that. Quantitative data wouldn't go beyond the interactions and statistical data that can be acquired, but the thesis hopes to find a deeper insight into communities and the companies as to why things are as they are. Beyond just numerical data, it wants to understand how the perception and ideas of consumers change in situations that happened.

Methods

Netnography

You can find netnography as a part of ethnography, that being that it takes the traits of ethnography and places them onto online communities. This qualitative research method looks at exploring the different aspects of online communities and analyzes them. It wants to "identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). This thesis will analyze the online communities associated with Riot Games and Blizzard entertainment. These communities can vary from gamers, cosplayers, and general consumers of their products. netnography "uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62).

The thesis will look at various online communities and their interactions, but because it is such a wide and large community this will mostly look at how it has affected the branding of the companies, especially during a time of crisis. The research hopes to see a connection between how both companies dealt with the issues of sexual harassment among other shortcomings the companies faced and how the communities from the online communities felt.

Combining netnography with the qualitative approach for data will mean that information found would try to analyze different emotions and meanings behind the phenomenon. This constructivism ontology helps as it can conclude how the communities themselves being international means different realities for the people involved. They may share similar interests

that put them in the online community, but ultimately each person's reality could differ based on experiences. Critical realism epistemology grasps the notion of similarly to constructivism but ultimately will try to pinpoint a few things that can be a constant between the differing realities.

Collecting data with netnography is split into two types, the first being the researcher's own field notes that they attain as they observe during their look at the communities. The second is the communications that can be seen with online communities online between or within their respective groups. This study will use a combination of both, as it will look at the communication that is being put out both from the companies themselves towards their communities as well as the intercommunication. That part would pertain to the second part listed. Then in regards to the first step, there are different areas that will need to be observed such as social media and interactions outside of the immediate text communications. The landscapes of the companies while they share some similarities, should differ as the research will hopefully show.

Netnography has many advantages such as the privacy that it gives and the data collection. Being able to protect people's privacy by lurking takes a lot of the privacy issues that could arise. This allows for the researcher to gather information without intervening as the information is publicly available in this scenario. The different channels that will be used for the research vary are all social media (Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc) it will also delve into blogs and forums from the companies' communities. The social media data can help give a decent overview of the current general conception and ideas people have of the companies. The different comments and interactions from posts on other social media are what help guide the netnography. The blogs and forums will help find the more focused communities, this will help the research get a more in-depth look but also be more versatile. Usually, forums and blogs tend to be for those more deeply entrenched in the community. Having that deeper look doesn't always show the whole picture and that is why the general information from social media and articles will help keep the data unbiased.

There are some negatives to netnography the one that sticks out the most is a misinterpretation. Misinterpretation would mean that the researcher would gather data and not present it as it truly is because of misunderstandings with communications or how things were truly meant. So while netnography can make things more relevant to today's ongoings it's important to have other factors fit into the framework to even it out. The data needs to be a bit more reliable and create a study that if looked at can be replicated or explained in a similar fashion. In regards to the phenomenon even if it changes it must still be a valid representation.

Secondary Data Analysis

Because there were limitations in getting involved with the companies as well as a lack of personal resources, the thesis will use secondary data analysis. This analysis relates to obtaining data and research information from other experiments or data pools that which the researcher was not involved in. "Such analysis can be done based upon information that is available in the

statistical information in the published articles, the data available in the text, tables, graphs, and appendices of the published articles, or upon the original data" (Church, 2002)

The secondary data collected should help bring together the netnography and create a solid foundation for the research. Because netnography is up to the researcher, gathering data outside of the researcher's control helps create a control that the data can be reliable. The secondary data will be collected from various reputable databases and articles that can back up what they have collected.

Because every researcher has an implicit bias it's important that they try to be as open to all the information they can attain. The data must be relevant and must keep in mind that "In secondary data analysis, the original data was not collected to answer the present research question. Thus the data should be evaluated for certain criteria such as the methodology of data collection, accuracy… and purpose" (Tripathy, 2013)

The general guidelines after finding what you will be researching identifying what data is possibly out there, comparing it to other available data to gain a further understanding, and finally analyze the data gotten. For this research, the secondary data will come from different databases and social media. Because there will be a concern with peoples' data some names may be replaced and indicated to protect anonymity.

The thesis will look at different opinions expressed online by the communities and gather qualitative data that will hopefully showcase how the communities have evolved before and after the crisis that Blizzard and Riot endured. This crisis based around sexual harassment and issues with products being released have had various threads and topics posted on Reddit and forums. These will give an insight into the community and their thoughts on it. Then data will be acquired to show financially and statistically if there has been any correlation with the crisis and how it has affected the companies. This data will predominantly be used to show the differences and changes it has created.

Ethics

In any research that is being conducted ethics must always be taken into consideration. In netnography and secondary data there are certain ethical considerations to have while obtaining the data and using it. In netnography, there are a few main aspects a researcher should do to be ethical. Kozinet (2002)states that the netnographer should disclose their presence to the community in which they are studying. This is in order to allow the community to know they are being observed and give them the opportunity to deny it or ask for privacy. This acknowledgment continues onto the next aspect which is telling the community that their information will be confidential and they will be completely anonymous. These ethical considerations that Kozinet (2002) lists have since been updated as the internet landscape evolved. The idea is that now as long as the communities are not hidden then it is not always necessary to ask for permission or anonymity and acknowledgment of the study as it could disturb the people who posted. Another issue that could arise from letting the group know they are being watched is that they could alter their interactions and therefore not give a true

representation. Instead, ethics is based on representing the data correctly and not skewing it. Using direct quotes and giving the full image is important for this aspect, as well as stating where the information was gotten.

The ethics of secondary data analysis rely on stating where the data comes from, it must be reputable and able to be backed up. The data must also be stated where it came from and acknowledged, on top of this making sure that it is relevant. It must be given a fair representation and when compared to others take things such as time and information available that can influence the data.

Analysis

In order to gain a further understanding of Blizzard and Riot and its consumers firstly the thesis needs to uncover who they are. Looking at the four domains created by Arnould and Thompson it should help uncover more about the consumers and their needs. The first category is the individual, both companies are multifaceted which then draws a wide variety of consumers. The three biggest subgroups of its consumers can be identified as gamers, cosplayers, and long-time fans. These three groups can intertwine and is a spectrum in each regard. The thesis will focus primarily on the gamer section, which has the least barrier to entry and is the biggest population of the three subgroups.

Gamers can be simply defined as someone who play video games, whether it is on a phone or a console. Both companies have products on both mobile and console, which means it is easily accessible to people. In terms of the theory what are the individuals in this gamer group purchasing and what does it represent. Well, both companies have online markets in which customers can purchase games as well as other content ranging from merchandise to in-game items. This is the main way both generate revenue, in 2021 Blizzard made 7,663 million dollars in net revenue from their digital online channels out of a total of 8,803 (Clement, 2022). The individual consumer generally stays only to the online markets, but a more involved and devoted consumer would make up that remaining net revenue with merchandising. On a similar note, the digital store for microtransactions is a huge revenue stream for Riot. "Microtransactions earn Riot Games an average of $31 per second"(Novak, 2022)

Because a large portion of the individual is online, and the price ranges vary drastically from different microtransactions and purchases online it is much harder to gather general data on people's socioeconomic status. One thing that stands out is that supporting Blizzard is different from Riot. In Blizzard's landscape, people buy into it, and with their biggest title World of Warcraft have to spend a monthly subscription. This makes it more exclusive or harder to attain for a low-income consumer than with Riot games where they have a freemium model.

This is where the second aspect of learning about the consumer culture comes in, the group. In this scenario being a part of Blizzards group requires more from the consumer, but brings a form of exclusivity. Riot's model of freemium means anyone can play the game for free but in order to stand out must spend money on in-game items to show off. What this does for the

gamer-consumer culture is that it sets two different standards. In Riot's case, the consumers are free to play the game but can be pushed and persuaded to invest money into the game to represent their likes and interests. For a consumer, you want to be involved with the other gamers and so eventually they will tend to put money in to fit into the group. It's similar to purchasing reputation and acceptance into the subgroup. Blizzard has the entry fee to access their products, whether it is a full purchase of the product or a subscription. Once they do as such they get access to the sub-group. Instead of purchasing to be accepted and gain a reputation, it is shown in the skill and time investment into the products. This can range from being on the leaderboards to having acquired items that require a lot of time spent playing the game. In both cases, people want to be accepted into the subculture and tend to be willing to put in the time or the money to be integrated into it.

The cross-dimensional level is very complex when it comes to gamers, depending on the society it can be looked down upon. In western culture gaming for the younger generations has become very widely accepted, but the older generation, they have negative views on it. Psychologist Patrick Markey mentions in an interview that the older generation that "It's hard for them to see value in video games. They'll think people are just wasting their time playing video games. And they simply don't understand the media. And it looks scary."(Marcotte, 2017) so for this cross-dimensional issue it becomes greater when money is being spent. Luckily there is such a large group of gamers that everyone can find their own niche, even in Blizzard and Riot games. There can be internal issues but as a whole, these gamers can see above it when there is a clash with other communities. Ultimately the subgroup of gamers is so diverse and different all over the world, that cross-dimensional cultures are hard to fit into a framework. There are very wealthy people and people who aren't as well off economically who can enjoy the same experiences.

The last step is in relation to macro, the gaming world is a global culture. From global esports competitions, content being translated into various languages, and special events that are cross-regional. The gaming scene is so entrenched on the internet and the international communities that traits are being shared now with different cultures. In Riot and Blizzards esports titles players from other regions pick up names for certain things that other cultures bring. A great example is Korean players in Blizzard's game Overwatch yelling out the word "Nice" after a great play, a word that is English-based. How do the companies deal with the different nations, well they make sure all content can be consumed by the different people across the world. This is from including broadcasts of gameplay in different languages to audiences to even movies and tv shows the companies have released. The most alienated group that comes up with gamers is the Chinese people, and that is because of all the regulations in place. There is such a large control that it's very different from the rest of the gaming groups. Overall the products placed on a global scale tend to correlate 1:1 to keep uniformity and grow the community, had things been different in what was offered then that's when issues arise. Special content that is region-locked is generally looked down upon as it neglects and cuts people off from the community.

After analyzing the four aspects of consumer culture theory, it seems as if the consumers largely have a marketplace of identity projects. This is that the consumer makes purchases in order to show their interests and create their own brand and stories behind it. That is because the gamers here try to buy into these different communities and gain respect. When looking at the marketing that Riot and Blizzard have done they tend to either tell their own story related to the customer or bring the consumer into it.

Blizzard released a famous advert in 2020 called "A toast to 15 years" In this advert, they bring famous content creators, esports athletes, and important figures of the game world of warcraft. The ad celebrates everything the game has brought to the community, this not only is good for consumers already invested as they feel recognized but also can encourage others to get involved seeing as how the community is. In the comments of the video, you find the 4th most upvoted comment from user Seal Sultan and it states "I haven't even played World of Warcraft, and this feels nostalgic". This emotional feeling resonates even with other users who seemingly played the game as another comment by the user Aanao states "EVERY TIME I COME BACK HERE, MY EYES FILL WITH TEARS…" copied directly from the video comment section it shows just how much emotion can happen. These comments were all released when the advert came out, but if you sort by the newest comment things are a bit different. The first comment when sorting by new states "Blizzard is crumbling I'm afraid we won't be able to experience the fun we had back then" by the user Alex Pricefield as well as another example from a different user CrazyShipper "Ah the last time there were happy moments…". So there seems to have been a massive shift in the population and how they feel about Blizzard.

With this shift, the research shifted to the most famous Riot games advert to see if things were similar. The advertisement in question is called "Our Game" and similar to Blizzard's celebration advert this one celebrates the community. They showcase different clips of famous moments in the game's history and popular figures speaking about the game. The difference here is that they are fighting back against this popular culture they show at the beginning relating to esports and its rise and the pushback it had. Finally, it ends with a statement of "not just a sport, our sport." Looking at the comment section apart from people quoting the video there are a couple of comments that show how powerful it was for the community of gamers even those not involved with the games. User Nathan Martinez commented "(I) am a dota player, but damn riot. This one was so good." DOTA is a competitor to Riot's game League of Legends. This was the 2nd most liked the comment, closely following it is a comment from user Dev Sony "Anyone else teared up in the end with pride?" These are similar emotions that were listed above in Blizzard's ad. In order to compare the comment section was then changed to the newest comments, and after filtering out some of the spam from promotional channels comments like "Still gives me chills" from user Steve Alnes and user Obsidian Lupus "I am thankful that League became part of my life!! I am proud to be a gamer!!"

So why is it not the same? They both are game companies that faced similar issues in sexual harassment cases. They both have various promising products that attract gamers yet Blizzard's has a negative sentiment behind it. A possibility is how things were handled by both

companies since the outcome of the sexual harassment cases and how each dealt with the crisis and branding of it all.

In the following section, this thesis will use image restoration theory to understand how both companies dealt with the issues of workplace harassment and how the communities responded to each. To gain a better understanding of how this all came to be the starting point is the actual crisis they each faced.

On July 20th, 2021 California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued Blizzard. "alleging executives had fostered an environment of misogyny and frat-boy rule for years, violating equal pay laws and labor codes along the way." (Conditt, 2021) The things that majorly stood out was the treatment of women. They made up a small percentage of the company 20% (Conditt, 2021), all leadership positions were white men, and not only were women harassed they also got paid less than their male counterparts. These issues even led to a situation where images of one of the female co-workers' nude pictures got sent around the office, she would then go on to commit suicide because of all the harassment. That was one of the big alarms that brought this to the general public and created a bigger outcry.

This was shocking to the community and lead to a lot of backlash, in a post on the World of Warcraft subreddit after the news dropped there were various comments from accounts that detailed their disapproval of Blizzard. User Brokenmonalisa left a comment that said

"I have played wow and other blizzard games for nearly 30 years. I only unsubbed to wow once, I've been giving them money basically every month since vanilla outside of a bit of time at the end of wod. Even if I wasn't playing I was subbed. When this news came out I canceled my sub for the second time ever."

This sentiment was seen time and time again on the post that highlighted some of the harassment. It even left people wondering "how much more we aren't hearing about" (user SkandermLander) It all became more shocking when news came out that the CEO Bobby Kotick knew all about the harassment but "he worked to keep some of them quiet and didn't report multiple incidents to the board of directors." (Velocci, 2022) this generated a lot of distrust between the consumers and Blizzard with whom a lot of had deep connections to. This generated various backlash from employee walkouts and petitions created by the general public to get rid of Kotick.

Blizzard would try and employ various tactics from the image restoration theory, first, they tried denial. Kostich sent out an email stating how "the allegations were "deeply disturbing" and that the "behaviors described are not reflective of our Activision company values." (Messner, 2021) on top of this Brack, the president of Blizzard came out and condemned the treatment saying it was "completely unacceptable". This then led to the next of reducing the offensiveness and saying that "Blizzard's commitment to employee safety and right to speak out without fear of retaliation". So while they worked to try and fix the issue there was not a crisis team working together with the entire staff, the reason this is noticeable is that during this time Fran Townsend

who is Blizzard's chief compliance officer went against the lawsuit. She came out with more denial, even after trying to reduce offensiveness. She stated that it "presented a distorted and untrue picture of [Blizzard], including factually incorrect, old, and out of context stories—some from more than a decade ago.". This denial would keep up for the rest of the lawsuit. Townsend would continue to release statements claiming that "We cannot let the egregious actions of others, and a truly meritless and irresponsible lawsuit, damage our culture of respect and equal opportunity for all employees." this would create issues with the rest of the Blizzard workers. This misalignment between reducing the offensiveness and trying to rectify it by trying to help the workers and the statements saying it was all untrue was very damaging. This led more of the Blizzard staff to come out and share their experiences. In a subreddit post from ten months ago, people compiled over twenty different workers who have come out and made statements on harassment and misconduct that occurred while they were with the company. Each person having links attached to their names so as to not only share their stories but be able to prove they were Blizzard employees.

This back and forth of how they have handled the issues and not been upfront and making change has hurt them. Below is a screenshot from their most recent Instagram post's comments.
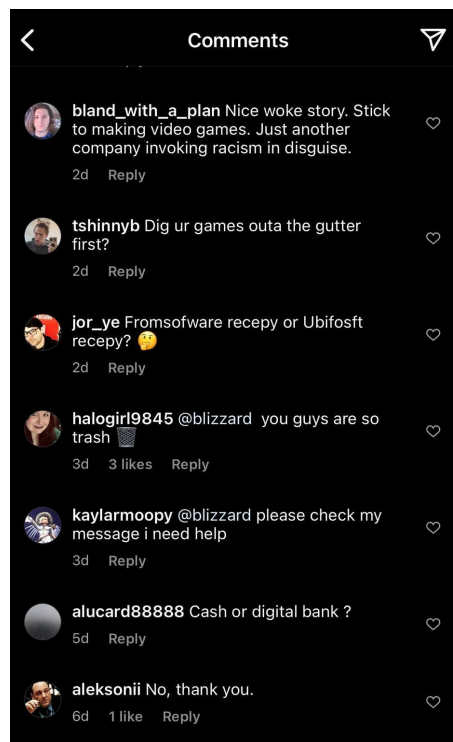
Blizzard Instagram post, from January 25th, 2022

As you can see in these examples people are highly dissatisfied, from commenting "No, thank you" to more explicit ones such as "you guys are so trash". This dissatisfaction arose from the harassment issues and has persisted still. Because of this backlash shareholders have even

taken action and filed another lawsuit against the company, stating that "the company failed to raise potential regulatory issues stemming from its discriminatory culture." (Conditt, 2021)

Consumers have continued to show their disapproval of the company, this is with the market information on Blizzard. In November of 2021, at the peak of this crisis when employee's walked out Blizzard stock hit the lowest it has been in 13 years. "Shares are down nearly 15% over the past 12 month"(Witowski, 2021) this as well as the stock price lowering over 6% showed a clear decline and how the consumers and the shareholders currently don't have much faith in the company.

The Riot case having happened a few years earlier shares a lot of similarities to this case. In 2018, as Riot was becoming more of a powerhouse in the gaming industry, Kotaku released an expose that would open the gates to all the wrongdoings in the workplace from Riot. Similarly to Blizzard's "frat culture" Riot was deemed a "bro culture" ultimately the same thing under different terms. The issue was that Riot forced a lot of its employers to keep quiet.

"Riot employees were restricted from talking on the record -because of non-disparagement agreements they signed before leaving the company. Some say they received severance after speaking to Riot's "talent" team—what the company calls its human resources team—about their experiences at the company." (D'Anastasio, 2018)

This prevented the harassment to be hidden for much longer than it should have, it also meant that a lot of the people who were harassed were scared to speak out for fear of losing their job. When the lawsuit arrived Riot similarly to Blizzard came out with statements saying that "We have a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination, harassment, retaliation, bullying, and general toxicity." (D'Anastasio, 2018). This act of reducing offensiveness and evading the responsibility stating that those statements do not align with the true company ethos. Ultimately Kotaku stated that they spoke with three women that were being groomed for promotions and then replaced by males, and co-workers stated that they received "unsolicited and unwelcome pictures of male genitalia from bosses or colleagues" (D'Anastasiom, 2018) and that there would be email chains of co-workers stating who they would sleep with and de-humanize them.

This would then lead to a series of lawsuits coming from past employers and like the Blizzard case the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing. This lawsuit continued to grow as more claimants backed it up. This is when the Riot team changed its image restoration strategy and rather than reducing offensiveness, they took a corrective action stance and released the following statement.

"We had to face the fact that despite our best intentions, we hadn't always lived up to our values. As a company we stood at a crossroads; we could deny the shortcomings of our culture, or we could apologize, correct course, and build a better Riot. We chose the latter. ... While we're proud of how far we've come since 2018, we must also take responsibility for the past. We

hope that this settlement properly acknowledges those who had negative experiences at Riot."
(Groth-Andersen, 2022)

This change in stance and acceptance of wrongdoing helped in some forms recover or amend some of the issues from the past. Because of this, they paid a $100 million dollar settlement, "The company will pay $80 million to members of the class-action suit and approximately $20 million toward plaintiffs' legal fees." In order to see if people are still commenting about this issue, I took a post similar to the previous one with Blizzard and did it with Riot. Below is the image of the latest post with the first comments that show up.
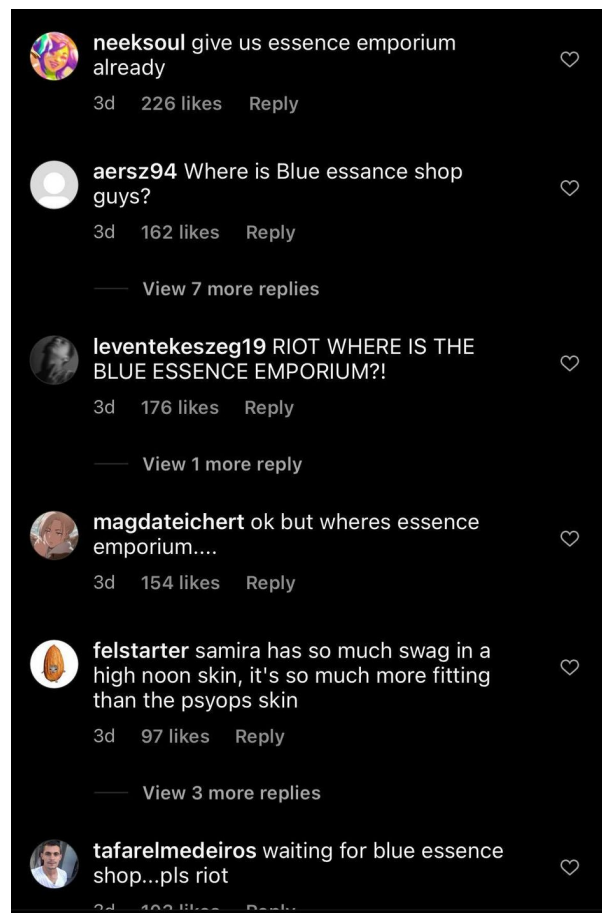
Instagram comments on a post from May 16th on Riot's account

In this scenario, the commenters are all excited about content in the game League of Legends, and the commenters are asking when this new shop in-game will come out. This is a special event, but you can tell there are no mentions of insulting the company.

While it's important to understand how each company handled crises and the community's comments on them, the thesis hopes to see what other factors change the different outcomes. The logical step is to look at branding and how the relationships outside of just the

crisis are in each company. This thesis will analyze both brands using the Kellers brand equity model, the multifaceted model will hopefully give a wider context to the comparison.

Starting at the bottom of the model, who is Blizzard? Well, their company website lists them as "At Blizzard Entertainment, we pour our hearts and souls into everything we create. We embrace our core values every day so that we can continue creating epic entertainment experiences for all our players." So the experience is the main selling point, this can be seen with all the forms of media they have offered from video games, conventions, and mixed media such as movies and shows. Having that clear focus, the only thing that could already raise some concern from customers is the statement that they are embracing "core values" as that would mean that the sexual harassment cases are not quite addressed and hopefully not passable in their values. Moving up the model is the meaning stage, starting with the imagery aspect. Below are some of the examples that Blizzard sends out to customers across social media.
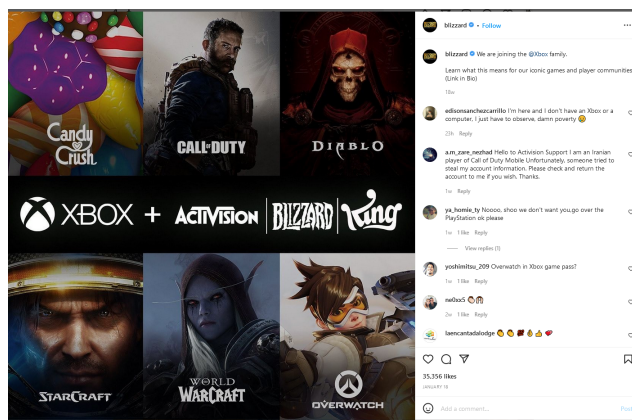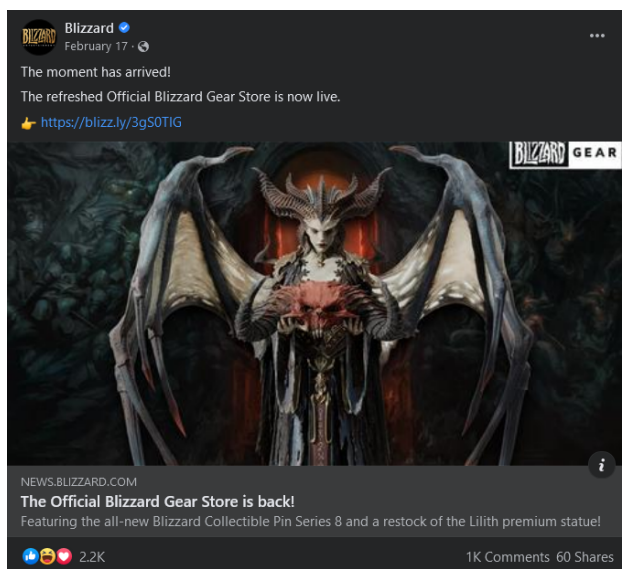
*All images were captured in May 2022, it screenshotted the most recent posts*

The top image is from Facebook, it advertises an update to the merchandise store that Blizzard runs. The image to the right is from Twitter and that is celebrating LGBTQ month with the merchandise. The bottom image is from Instagram and that is talking about the company being bought out by Microsoft. The message you can attain from these three most recent posts is that of merchandise. There is a clear distinction that merchandise currently is placed at a higher value than the games themselves. This is a distinction that probably doesn't appease the audience who is hungry for change and new products. Now is when the other half of the meaning stage comes in: performance. Blizzard has recently delayed a lot of its new projects, the last time Blizzard released a new project was back in 2016. That game was Overwatch, since then games have gotten updates and content to try and add more to other products they own, but ultimately not enough to please the general consumer. Apart from gaming in 2016, they released "Warcraft" a movie based on the game World of Warcraft. This project fell short, especially for fans that had awaited a movie from the company for many years. Reviews were mostly negative as they got an average rating of 2.3 out of 5 from critics as shown in the Rotten tomatoes website that gathers reviews for films. Projects that were promised to come out in the last few years have been pushed back to 2023 and are at the possibility of even more delays. Having these negative products, as well as a focus on merchandise starts to give the brand a negative light. The changes need to be made at this stage in order to start the process to gain more brand equity.

        To gain the full knowledge the rest of the pyramid will be finished analyzing Blizzard in order to see what other things stand out, even if this stage is the pivotal point. The third stage is the response stage, this is where judgments and feelings come. Because there has been a disconnect since the lawsuit, people seem to be less inclined to associate themselves with Blizzard. The general opinion which can be seen from comments left on social media means that creating some space between the company and the consumers whose views don't align is currently the status. The negativity because of the lawsuit and avoiding responsibility as well as the openness from the blizzard whistleblowers makes it hard to try and align as a Blizzard fan.

        The top of the pyramid ends with resonance, which is how people can relate to the company. This is where the long-term customers are, but as seen in a previous comment they seem to be distancing themselves. It is very hard to lose someone at this stage but as seen, that is not the case here, mostly because fans feel let down both from a standard viewpoint with products and treatment of workers.

        Riot's identity is described much differently and formatted as such. On their website instead of having a direct motto, they list their core values. Riot has five core values and they are as listed: player experience first, dare to dream, thrive together, execute with excellence, and stay hungry; stay humble. The wording on this can be broad enough that it can sometimes leave it up to the interpretation of the reader, this can be a positive as the reader can make it align with how they feel. The core value of thriving together and staying humble are ones that can be seen in their statement after accepting change in their lawsuit. By thriving together they try to bring the entire community to prosper, but more importantly, stay humble part of being humble is accepting being wrong. Being able to back up the ideas you send out about the company helps

back up the authenticity. Next is the meaning stage, below are some imagery and messages that Riot sends out on their socials grabbing the first post from the same platforms as above.
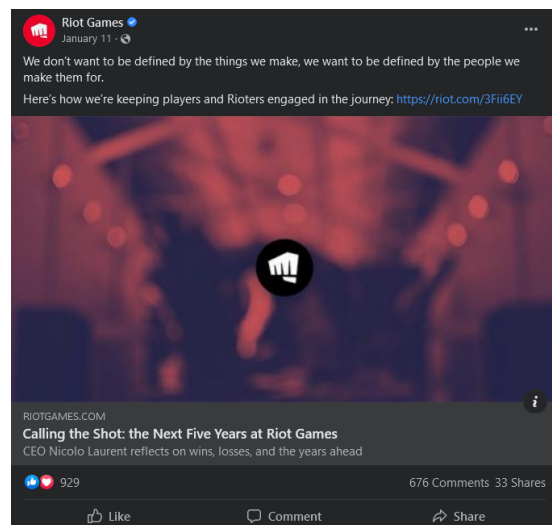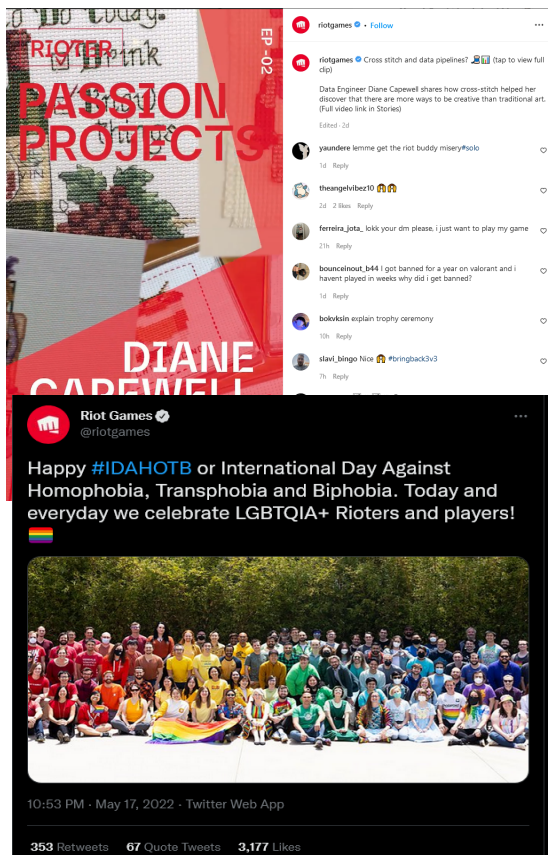
All screenshots captured in May 2022, it grabbed the most recent posts

There is already a noticeable difference in the posts between Riot and Blizzard. From left to right is the Instagram post that talks about a worker at Riot and their passion project. On the right is a Facebook post in which they lay out a road map for the next five years at riot games and leave some very pensive thoughts for the reader. Finally is the Twitter post, which is celebrating LGBTQIA riot employees and players. The importance of communicating with your audience is key for any good brand connection with its consumers. On top of that after the misconduct and harassment Riot has made an effort to celebrate its workers and show it on social media. Unlike Blizzard, the company is not selling something but rather telling stories and

making connections. It appears that one part of the section is doing well, now to take a closer look at the performance side. In 2019 they released teamfight tactics, an auto chess game. Riot then followed that up in 2020 releasing Valorant, Legends of Runeterra, and Wild Rift. 2021 released Ruined King and Hextech mayhem. The other venture they took apart from the music production they have done on and off for some time is the hit show Arcane which was also released in 2021. On top of all this in the five-year plan that was released, they teased various other projects that are on their way. These products for the most part were well received, in comparison Arcane on rotten tomatoes had an average score of 4.9 out of 5. The games were stand-alone projects that for the most part added to other games' universes. As seen in the comments for an example above people were craving more asking for the essence shop and creating more interest in the games. The structure of positive re-enforcement of workers and good communication mixed with positive performance products means that the meaning stage is a good foundation for brand equity. The third part which is the response talks about judgments and feelings. Generally, Riot games will have the judgment of being a gamer company, die-hard fans and people in the communities can get respect for what this resonates with but people who are uninformed will not draw a conclusion from the brand. This is because knowing about Riot can be as simple as someone who enjoys their product or someone more involved in this large community of millions. The feelings from the association can generate relation to the famous esports that Riot puts on, it can be a similar feeling to when people wear jerseys from their favorite sports team. It can create a deeper connection and support for the games as well as being able to show that to others. Finally reaching the resonance stage, how does Riot include its consumers and create a deeper connection. Well, the beginning is the things such as clear communications, the plan of doing the five-year plan gives an insight into the background of Riot. This creates a connection that can't always be made, those who want to be more involved get that opportunity. The riot and long-term consumers is a relationship that can be in balance but is always available even without a re-purchasing into getting involved with the products again. While they may have lost some consumers during all the backlash the communication and humbling experience of apologizing did a good job at amending that.

Discussion

Looking over the analysis, different thoughts can arise from it. But more importantly, how can Blizzard games look at Riot's previous crisis and learn from it and overcome the issues that they face now. The brand image of Blizzard has created a disconnect from consumers and created negative attention. In order to try and combat this, a theoretical framework suggestion can be created on what steps Blizzard can begin to take to turn things around. First, it begins with acceptance of wrongdoing and corrective action. It seems that a lot of people currently have a strongly negative view of the company, and without changing that it'll be hard for the rest to come. Similar to Riot humbling themselves and declaring they did wrong and what ways they changed for the better Blizzard should follow suit. This change in stance and showcase of

apologizing should help sway some consumers back to give them another chance. On top of this Blizzard should state ways they will improve in the future, as well as make changes to involve more women in the company. This has to be a genuine effort from management, not like the case when Jen O'neal resigned. O'neal had been working at Blizzard for 13 years and when she resigned after stating "It was clear that the company would never prioritize our people the right way…I have been tokenized, marginalized, and discriminated against." (Good, 2021). O'neal had also found out that her male counterpart filling the same role was getting paid more. There either needs to be a complete change from the top down or clear pathways and changes that Blizzard will undertake to change the frat culture.

Once this crisis has been cleared up the following step should be to do two things: Create a crisis team as to have a more unified message between all at the company and go back to being about great products that the consumers want. Riot similarly to Blizzard in the beginning tried to reduce offensiveness, but it was a team-wide message. This made everything more organized, unlike having different directors interact differently with the crisis. The other part is the focus shifting from merchandise and what seems to be a quick buck from consumers and focus on their products. Not having new games or media to share for six years, on top of disappointing fans hurts the brand a lot. When there is nothing exciting for people to enjoy or experience they can sit and dwell on all the negativity that arises from the company. A perfect example of how having good content can distract from a crisis is Riot after being sued, came out with K/DA in the days after. K/DA was a fictional band created from League of Legends characters and it released music as well as in-game items for players to experience. It was a great distraction and at the moment of writing has released another full studio album and garnered three million monthly listeners on Spotify. It did not fully take away from the issue, but it allowed people to be involved as they had something else on their minds apart from the lawsuit. If Blizzard can deliver a sequel or generate hype for a new product it can help move the story along, rather than sitting on the negativity that flows into each message that is being sent to Blizzard across social media.

The competition between Riot and Blizzard will continue to keep evolving and only get more and more competitive as the digital age keeps blossoming. The companies will have to continue releasing good products, offer new experiences, and find ways to gain an edge in esports and sales to stand out. Currently, the findings have shown that Blizzard is lacking behind from a brand and consumer standpoint, constantly being bashed across all social media. This can be equated to not only the lawsuit but can be seen in the content and messages they put out which affect them. The comparison between no new exciting products for close to six years, and the social media posts selling merchandise rather depict a disconnect between what consumers want and the company. This can explain the market shift, as Riot cleared its name since the lawsuit and is delivering products that people are excited about. Comparing the products and their reviews are clear indicators of how people view the companies. The thesis uncovered that by using the different models and systems from the theory that there was a clear distinction between Blizzard and Riot. Riot appears to be at its peak, having overcome its adversity while

the opposite can be said for Blizzard, whose stock and brand image have plummeted. Overall Blizzard has to change its ways if it wants to become as dominant as it once was, otherwise it can risk becoming obsolete and left behind by its fans as they move to more enticing brands.

There were some findings that were very unexpected, finding people so excited for Riot and barely any backlash was surprising. The brand has been well known to have a toxic gaming community, and given the support that people have for rights in the workplace, I assumed there would have been more hate in the comments. I thought it maybe only pertained to a few posts, but when looking at posts from the past two months across social media platforms there were barely any negative comments based around the lawsuit, if any it was from the game. On Blizzard's account while it was expected there would be more negativity, it made more sense since it was all more recent. So if things were a bit more developed would the comment sections look similar? Or is this a cultural thing based on the appreciation of the products released. It would be interesting to try and explore down the line if there is a shift or if it remains the same.

Conclusion

This thesis was hoping to uncover the shift in consumer consumption and the reputation of Blizzard Entertainment and Riot Games. It explored the different theories and effects of crisis communication and analyzed their social media platforms to gain a further understanding of the communities. The results could show a correlation between both companies that faced lawsuits that involved harassment in the workplace, it showed a correlation based on how each handled the crisis and how this affected its communities. The outcome was that when a company is apologetic and tries to improve going forward, rather than fighting the crisis against the community it will tend to be more beneficial. Consumers in the gaming sphere are keen that the things they support to align with their morals, and when companies do negative actions such as harassment they tend to disassociate. This disassociation then leads to toxicity from the community as they can feel hurt that a brand they resonated with can have negative and harmful actions. It seems that after some time and constant backlash things have started to shift to some of the realizations that this thesis uncovered.

The most recent news that has developed since the writing of the thesis has been that Microsoft has purchased Blizzard. This can be a step in the right direction, Microsoft having more funds and being more established can help clear the image and issues that have come out in the past. While Kotick will continue as Blizzard CEO, having a connection to Microsoft and more importantly a new story unfolding should be a positive for Blizzard. As of the purchase Blizzard has even begun implementing the ideas that this thesis suggests. Ybarra a president at Blizzard released a blog post that "expresses regret at how some employees have felt treated at the company and outlines a road map on how to improve the toxic work culture. This mostly involves hiring new positions committed to investigating claims, with emphasis on this extending all the way to leadership." (Young, 2022) The results of accepting wrongdoing and

creating change will hopefully bring back the Blizzard people who had previously distanced themselves from the company.

It would be interesting to come back in a few years and see if they have landed back on their feet. For Riot, it took some time but now is at the forefront of gaming, but if Blizzard can create a similar resurgence it would be interesting to see how the outcomes of the thesis could be shaped. Overall relating this to a more global scale which is the game industry, the thesis provides a foundation that other companies can look at when facing crises. From smaller indie companies to established ones, being able to place your brand in the models mentioned in the thesis and following the precautions listed would be beneficial. The thesis shows how having a crisis team ready for preventative measures can in the long run save a lot of issues, as well as what steps could best be taken in this specific industry to minimize damages.

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