

Dinosaurs, Space Pirates, and Friendships Oh My!...or Not?: An Ethical Case Study of *No Man's Sky's* Marketing Strategy

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Abstract

This study explored the peculiar strategy Hello Games employed during their marketing of *No Man's Sky*. By applying Paul Grice's (1989) cooperative principle to several of Hello Games' advertisements, an ethical evaluation was derived that found the company to be unethical in their marketing of the game. Through discussion, it is proposed that Sean Murray—Hello Games' company face and lead developer—adopted a dirty hands approach to unethically market *No Man's Sky* which ultimately led to a breach in trust for Hello Games' company-consumer relationship and to the rampant backlash from *No Man's Sky*'s players.

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Imagine being promised the ability to travel to an almost infinite number of solar systems in the blink of an eye. Each system would have its own planets, moons, and even unique vegetation and wildlife specific to those planets and moons. Imagine being promised the ability to use a spacecraft to engage in full-scale war between advanced alien factions, to be able to explore the deepest depths of oceans, brimming with life, and to be able to do whatever one wanted in such a universe all with one's closest friends, family, and fellow online gamers. Finally, imagine the surprise of over 743,000 gamers (Kuchera, 2016) when they discovered that many of those promises were only fabrications of a game that was still in development and might never truly exist.

The feelings that arose when these gamers not only realized the disappointment of their purchases, but also that they had been shown "wildly unrepresentative" content to manipulate them into buying Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (Caldwell, 2016), led not only to a massive 90% drop in the player base of the game after just two weeks of its release (Saed, 2016), but also to a major demand for refunds (PSA, 2016). In fact, the number of refund demands was so high that it forced several companies to reevaluate their future return policies (Copeland, 2016) and opened up a larger debate about how such an issue should be handled in the future (Caldwell, 2016; Groux, 2016; Kuchera, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore the peculiar strategy Hello Games employed during their marketing of *No Man's Sky*. As such, I offer a brief synopsis of the case to justify why the particular scenario was selected.

Accordingly, Hello Games first demonstrated *No Man's Sky* at the E3 gaming convention in 2014. They continued to give brief demos every few months afterward, but fans soon began

to complain that the demos gave no indication of how the game would really be played. There was even a week right before *No Man's Sky*'s release that a few people reportedly obtained a pre-release copy of the game (Schreier, 2016) and claimed it was nothing like what was advertised by the company; however, Hello Games said little about these remarks, and instead, asked customers to essentially *trust* in them (Murray, 2016b; Murray, 2016f) and to ignore those critiques until after they had played the game themselves. Ultimately, after *No Man's Sky* was released on August 8th, 2016, fans went into an uproar as they protested that Hello Games—and specifically, Sean Murray, their company face and lead developer—had lied about several features missing from *No Man's Sky*. With this paper, I will explore Hello Games' peculiar marketing tactics that were so controversial for players. Then, through my analysis, I will present an ethical evaluation of their strategy that will determine a ruling as to its ethicality.

Literature Review

Through my research, two key areas emerged that offered useful information for this study. First, research relating to the ethical decision-making process provided interesting insights into why Hello Games might have chosen to market *No Man's Sky* the way they did (Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Koszembar-Wiklik, 2016; Schenker, Arnold, & London, 2014). Next, research relating to trust in advertising seemed particularly important for this study as Hello Games' ethical act in question seemed to hint toward a possible breach in trust with the advertiser/consumer relationship (Alsamydai, 2016; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Ulusua, 2011). The following sections of this literature review will offer a brief overview of each of these research areas, and the rationale and research questions that drove this study will then be introduced.

Ethical Decision-Making

Hunt and Vitell (1986) first introduced their general theory of marketing ethics to establish a descriptive model for studying ethical decision-making in marketing campaigns. In their model, they declared that all people are influenced by both deontological and teleological evaluations any time they deem an experience ethically questionable. In other words, people evaluate their actions based on both the morality of the actions themselves (deontological) as well as the perceived consequences resulting from those actions (teleological). However, Hunt and Vitell (1986) reported that peoples' personal experiences—as well as their organizational, industry, and cultural norms—largely affect how much a person is affected by their deontological/teleological evaluations during the decision-making process, and they proposed that different people will focus on any mix of ethical judgements or consequential outcomes during this process. Thus, Hunt and Vitell (1986) concluded that people who are more worried about the ethicality of something will tend to base their behaviors on deontological evaluations whereas people who focus more on the end product of a situation will base their behaviors on teleological evaluations.

Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) later found support for the general theory of marketing ethics while studying salesforce supervision by noting how respondents' ethical judgements (deontological) of fictional scenarios seemed to change as the consequences of the character's actions (teleological) shifted between positive and negative results. Celuch, Saxby, and Oeding (2015) reported similar results during their study of counterfactual thinking and regret on ethical decision-making. Basically, Celuch et al. (2015) found people judged unethical decisions as more unethical if they thought they would be caught, and they were less likely to report behavior intentionality as well. Emotional regret was also found to influence both ethical judgement and

behavioral intention as people were less likely to want to behave unethically if they thought negative consequences would arise as a result of their behavior (Celuch et al., 2015).

With findings such as Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) and Celuch et al.'s (2015), one could only wonder what it is about these organizational environments that causes managers and employees to feel it acceptable to be unethical when there is no one around to induce negative consequences. What incentive could there be to entice individuals to want to overtly commit an unethical act? Chonko (1995) provides some insight into this phenomenon as he explains employees of any organization will often find themselves in an awkward or uncomfortable spot: they have the pressure to "make goal" for the company which can lead them to feeling pressure to commit ethically questionable decisions (p. 249). Murphy and Laczniak (2006) further expound on this debate as they declare that managers sometimes feel as if they should "choose to follow organizational pressures rather than their own conscience" and they "rationalize their decisions by maintaining that they are simply *agents* of the corporation" (p. 3). Therefore, the immense sense of pressure from managers, employees, stakeholders, and even coworkers would seem to be a large factor in causing a person to act unethically.

Interestingly, results from Avnet, Pham, and Stephen's (2012) studies indicate peoples' feelings may also influence their decision-making more than they might think. Avnet et al. (2012) observed many significant relations between people and their tendency to trust in their feelings as viable information when making decisions. First, people who trusted more in their feelings were more likely to rely on those feelings to make judgments, reject unfair offers, and to make less logically appealing decisions while they were also subject to being influenced more by ad-induced feelings. Second, trust in feelings was found to affect decisions only when adequate mental resources were available for a person (Avnet et al., 2012). In other words, participants'

mental aptitude during a situation positively affected their ability to discriminate whether to trust their feelings as judgment. If people were able to process a decision and determine whether their feelings were representative and relevant, they were able to use their feelings more appropriately when they made decisions, but if they were unable to mentally complete this process, then they would generally trust in their feelings by default.

Martin, Bagdasarov, and Connelly (2015) also addressed this area of cognitive ability on ethical decision-making in their study. Specifically, they examined the relationship between ethical decision-making and a person's working memory capacity (WMC). Essentially, WMC "refers to the capability that an individual possesses for holding memory items in active consciousness and for mentally manipulating or transforming this information (Martin et al., 2015, p. 272). To better illustrate this process, people rely on their short term memory to remember the name of an attractive person they just met; however, they rely on their WMC to create a poem using each letter of the attractive person's name. In their study, Martin et al. (2015) observed participants' WMC to significantly affect their sensemaking processes—processes that are critical to ethical decision-making. WMC was also found to marginally affect ethical decision-making more than peoples' ethical education, ethical exposure, and even their intelligence. Though Martin et al. (2015) admit that their findings did not support the assertion that someone might be more "well-endowed" (p. 284) in their ethical abilities than another, they assert that their findings indicate that everyone will still need ethics training throughout their lives.

One final approach to the ethical decision-making process worth noting is the *dirty hands* approach. Based on Walzer's (1974) seminal work—but dating back to even Machiavelli's time—the ethical dilemma of attaining *dirty hands* generally finds its way into political

discussions (Mittwede, 2012), but as Hatier (2014) argues, it can be applied to many different scenarios in which an executive decision must be made. Essentially, the dirty hands approach occurs when people choose to base their decisions on their own judgements and experiences rather than simply act mechanically by following a set of ethical rules or guidelines. As Hatier defines it, choosing to get one's hand dirty "is neither a mere repetition of previous decisions, nor the systematic application of rules" (Hatier, 2014, p. 1093), but rather it is when people stand for what they believe in when they feel all other choices would lead to certain anarchy. For instance, some police officers may capture a group of criminals who claim they are holding people hostage and that those people will die within the hour if they are not released. The officers, thus, have a difficult decision to make wherein both choices would result in negative consequences: either they could torture the criminals to cause them to reveal the location of their hostages—which would be against their morals to torture another human but would save the lives of many other people—or the officers could choose not to torture the criminals—which would be in line with their morals not to torture someone, but would, inevitably, allow many people to die. Either way, the dirty hands approach argues the officers must make the best decision possible, given the circumstances, and suffer some form of consequence because of that decision (Walzer, 1974).

Though this approach may seem like it is ridden with its own slew of ethical dilemmas—as all good ethical approaches should be—Walzer (1974) argues having dirty hands is beneficial because it allows select people to achieve things that would otherwise be impossible to achieve were they bound by traditional ethical rules. However, he claims these people must also atone for their ill-doings in the end to make things right with those who were affected by their decisions. Nonetheless, Mittwede (2012) seems to argue that although most leaders will

experience some form of temptation of having dirty hands, the ethical trials will not always be so extreme as he states that these leaders will not necessarily be “thrown to the wind” (p. 32) if they continue to work hard to be ethical before and after each decision. With the above literature, however, it seems leaders will need to be pretty attentive to the inevitable pressures they will face when making their ethical decisions.

Trust in Advertising

But why should these leaders put so much energy into being ethical? Scholars seem to argue that being ethical is another way to establish trust in a company/consumer relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Murphy & Laczniak, 2006). Trust is a construct that has been demonstrated to be important to most aspects of organizational marketing success (Alsamydai, 2016; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Ulusua, 2011). However, its definition has generally been up to debate as scholars have interpreted it to mean anything from simply expecting another party to provide positive outcomes (Thomas, 2009) to having confidence in another's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) even differentiate trustworthiness (based on actions) from trust (general trust in company), while Soh, Reid, & King (2009) claim that trust—specifically in the case of advertising—can be researched in two ways: trust in a single advertisement and trust in advertising as a whole. With these many definitions of trust, however, Ulusua (2011) points out that they tend to have two dimensions in common: first, they measure trustability, or the perception that the other party can “fulfill or satisfy consumer needs” (p. 3936); and second, they measure intentionality, or the “belief that goes beyond the available evidence to make individuals feel, with assurance, that the brand [or other party] will be responsible and caring despite the vicissitudes of future problematic situations and circumstances” (p. 3936). Nevertheless,

whatever definition of trust is ultimately accepted, the following research indicates that the phenomenon is worth examining further in academia.

For instance, Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that trust and commitment are more effective for marketers than power and coercion. In their research, they reported that established trust in a relationship could lead to cooperation, functional conflict, and even increased relationship commitment which could, in turn, lead to acquiescence in the relationship. They also found that trust could reduce uncertainty, and through an increased sense of relationship commitment, could decrease the other party's propensity to leave or disband the relationship too. In accordance with these findings, Alsayyadai (2016) observed that consumers who trusted an advertiser, their message, or even the medium that the advertiser implemented would be more likely to buy a product than those who did not trust the advertiser. These findings make sense as people generally have a more positive attitude about those they trust than those they do not (Alsayyadai, 2016; Elnaga & Abunayyan, 2016). In fact, as Murphy and Laczniak (2006) assert, people just want to feel as if they are "being treated fairly" and not "being deceived by untruthful claims or unknowingly exposing themselves to risks" (p. 5).

For organizations to help offset some of these feelings of deception or manipulation, several studies have recognized the importance of message design (Herbst, Finkel, Allan, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007) as well as selecting an appropriate medium (Alsayyadai, 2016; Elnaga & Abunayyan, 2016; Jo, 2005) when advertising to consumers. In regard to message design, Kirmani and Zhu (2007) examined the difference between promotion-focused people—people focused on how an advertisement can help them achieve dreams—and prevention-focused people—people focused on how to avoid being duped by advertisements—in their reception of advertisements. They found that prevention-focused people were more

skeptical and less approving of advertisements depicting moderate levels of manipulation, and they also observed prevention-focused people to use their persuasion knowledge to avoid the perceived manipulation as well (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). Herbst et al. (2012) also observed skeptical consumers being swayed by their predisposed trust levels of advertisers in their study of advertisement disclaimers. Herbst et al. (2012) reported that participants who trusted a brand before seeing its advertisement were unaffected by disclaimer speed while those who did not know or trust the brand found faster disclaimers to be signs of the brands being untrustworthy.

Consumer skepticism toward messages have been found to be affected by medium selection as well. Jo (2005) noted participants to trust in traditional media (newspapers, TV stations) more than online media; interestingly, however, those same participants reported to also believe online news stories when the stories were positive which was contrary to their overall responses. This finding may have been a hint at the technological savvy society that was beginning to emerge as a result of the increasing popularity of social media platforms. Elnaga and Abunayyan's (2016) findings seem to support this claim as they presented data from a 2013 Nielsen Company survey (N=29,000) which provided a list of the most commonly trusted sources of advertising. Of the items in that list, "Branded websites" (p. 108) were voted to be credible by 69% of viewers, whereas ads in newspapers were only deemed credible by 61% of them. In fact, branded websites were reported to be the second most-trusted source of information falling only behind "Recommendations from Acquaintances" which was trusted by 84% of participants. Conclusively, these findings indicate that proper medium selection—as well as message construction—may be vital for achieving the sense of commitment and trust that Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued are necessary for advertisement success.

Rationale and Research Questions

As the literature provided indicates, ethical decision-making is a complex process, and in the case of organizational advertisements, the process becomes even trickier as there are often various stakeholders who will pressure the organization to make decisions which favor them above all others (Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Murphy & Laczniak, 2006). However, there is strong support dictating the importance for organizations to act ethically in their dealings with consumers to build trust toward the company/consumer relationship (Alsamyda, 2016; Elnaga & Abunayyan, 2016; Herbst et al., 2012; Jo, 2005; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Murphy & Laczniak, 2006). These scholars maintain Morgan and Hunt's (1994) original findings that argue commitment and trust in a company/consumer relationship will lead to more success than even power and coercion.

With this argument in mind, the present study investigated Hello Games' controversial advertising strategy. Because such a large amount of people were upset once they received and played their actual copy of *No Man's Sky* (Caldwell, 2016; Kuchera, 2016; Saed, 2016), I sought to learn what might have gone so wrong throughout the marketing-to-release process that warranted such an outcry. Most fan response articles and videos to *No Man's Sky* seemed to claim that Hello Games had lied or manipulated them into buying the game (AngryJoeShow, 2016; Cymen90, 2016) while others provided lists of content and features which they argued were missing from the game's final product (Cymen90, 2016; Hillier, 2016). Consequentially, as these fan criticisms seemed to revolve around the issues of ethical decision-making and trust, I postulated that a breach of ethics may have occurred in Hello Games' marketing advertisements:

RQ1: How might Hello Games' advertising of *No Man's Sky* have been ethical or unethical?

Method

To introduce the specific nature of this study, the following method section is divided into two subsections. First, I discuss the theoretical background of Paul Grice's (1989) cooperative principle and how it was used to justify an ethical evaluation of Hello Games' advertisements. Then, I explain how I specifically chose the data used for this study and offer my rationale for why the particular trailers, interviews, tweets, and blogs I analyzed produce the best representation of Hello Game's overall marketing of *No Man's Sky*.

Theoretical Background

To determine the ethicality of Hello Games' marketing strategy for *No Man's Sky*, I applied Paul Grice's (1989) cooperative principle to several of Hello Games' advertisements. The cooperative principle dictates people expect, or trust, others to communicate cooperatively by following four categories of speech: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Essentially, quantity refers to people not saying too much or too little in response to someone while quality involves people making their message true; they must not say what they believe to be false, nor should they claim something in which they lack "adequate evidence" (p. 27). Relation primarily deals with the relativity of a response; for example, if a person was asked about the color of the sky but, instead, began discussing the color of the ground, their response would not be relative to the initial question. Finally, manner specifically refers to *how* something is said rather than the message itself. Grice (1989) explains that for a person to achieve a cooperative manner of speech, they should "Be perspicuous...avoid obscurity of expression...avoid ambiguity...be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)...[and] be orderly" (p. 27). According to Grice (1989), if people are able to adhere to these four categories in their conversations, they are cooperatively communicating.

However, because the cooperative principle proposes that people trust others to communicate cooperatively, a person—knowing that someone trusts them to behave accordingly—can strategically disregard any of the maxims in order to manipulate others for personal gain (Grice, 1989). Consequently, this manipulation would indicate a breach in trust between the communicators, and ultimately, would be an intentionally deceptive action which many would rule as unethical (Alsaydai, 2016; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Murphy & Lacniak, 2006). Thus, in using Grice's (1989) cooperative principle, I analyzed specific advertisements of *No Man's Sky* (trailers, interviews, tweets, blogs) to determine whether Hello Games did, in fact, follow the cooperative principle. Specifically, I examined whether these select advertisements leading up to the release of *No Man's Sky* followed the categories of the cooperative principle, or whether Hello Games may have disregarded some—or even all—of the maxims altogether.

Data

To begin, I first classified the features gamers argued were missing into five main categories to help refine how I approached analyzing the data; the categories included the following features: multiplayer, faction interaction, spaceship mechanics, specific animals/biomes, and some form of conclusion for reaching the center of the game's universe (Cymen90, 2016; Hillier, 2016). I then used these categories to more specifically examine a series of Hello Games' advertisements about *No Man's Sky* to determine whether the company made false claims about the final product of their game by violating any of Grice's (1989) cooperative principle categories. To bracket my experience and avoid unnecessary bias, it should also be noted that I, myself, bought *No Man's Sky* the night it was released, and so I have a fair amount of background knowledge relating to what was present in the game at the time of

its release. I used my experience to provide additional insights for this study that might have been unobtainable otherwise.

To determine which Hello Games advertisements were analyzed for this study, I decided to only examine advertisements—trailers, interviews, tweets, blogs—that occurred from March 1st, 2016 up until the game's release on August 8th, 2016. Essentially, I ruled out advertisements previous to this time period as game developers are continuously changing the content of their games up until players see them; as Sean Murray may have stated something back in 2014 about a possible feature to be included in *No Man's Sky*, it would be unfair to hold him, or the company, accountable if that feature was not included in the final product of the game over two years later—especially if the feature really did exist at the time. With this parameter in mind, I examined all official video trailers and interviews of *No Man's Sky* included on PlayStation's YouTube channel as well as interviews conducted by various other game channels (Bleich, 2016; Crossley & Corriea, 2016; JeuxVideo.com, 2016; Murray & Carboni, 2016). I also explored the blog (Murray, 2016g) and Reddit AMA (seanymurray, 2016) posted by Sean Murray on *No Man's Sky*'s release date as well as every tweet on Hello Game's official Twitter account from the time they tweeted they had “went gold [sic]”—meaning *No Man's Sky* had officially been copied onto a retail disc—(Murray, 2016a) up until the game was released. With this data, I hoped to achieve a time close enough to *No Man's Sky*'s release date in which Hello Games could reasonably be held accountable for what they presented to their audiences.

Results

Before delving into this analysis, it should be noted that the following examples I provide are not an exhaustive list of every instance that may be classified as lying, deceit, or manipulation performed by Sean Murray or Hello Games. Rather, these examples aim to

establish a comprehensive sense of the overall strategies employed by the company. Also, even though the categories below are presented as distinct and separate from one another, there was a noticeable amount of overlap between them when deciding which category best-fit each observation. As such, I categorized each example based on my own subjective evaluation, but future research may determine they fit better elsewhere.

Quantity

Grice's (1989) first category, quantity, had the least amount of violations by Hello Games, in part, due to the fact that many of the examples that would have been placed here seemed to better-demonstrate other categories such as how the company said too much—relation—or too little—manner—about *No Man's Sky*. However, of the cases included in this category, they tended to focus on the lack of info given by Hello Games on their game. For instance, even after *No Man's Sky* was facing negative critiques by people who had received the game early, they simply tweeted, “We've spent years filling No Man's Sky with surprises. You've spent years waiting. Please don't spoil it for yourself : (“ (Murray, 2016f). Minutes later, they also tweeted “Take a break from reading about it, and picking vids apart. You can experience for yourself so soon” (Murray, 2016b). Rather than addressing the actual complaints of these gamers or even acknowledging whether they might be true, Hello Games chose to remain silent. The company also did not discuss any of the five categories of missing content—provided above—that fans worried might not be in the game.

Instead, four days later, the company tweeted again exclaiming “5am at Hello Games. Wrapping up a month of work on our first update. Lots of new features, balancing, and content” (Murray, 2016i). Once again, Hello Games' tweet answered none of the peoples' questions and only prompted further questions to develop. In fact, when those update notes were released

(Murray, 2016e), and even after Sean Murray tweeted about his blog (Murray, 2016h) that addressed “What exactly do you do in No Man’s Sky?” (Murray, 2016g), there was little information provided in those notes or blog that actually related to anyone’s questions, and Sean Murray—in his blog—even told customers to see Reddit (TheSeaOfThySoul, 2016) and Neogaf (cpp_is_king, 2016) posts to better learn about *No Man’s Sky* rather than just offer more clarity about the game. The problem with this strategy, however, was that these posts simply provided previous quotes from Sean Murray that ranged anywhere from 2014 to 2016 which still did not answer anyone’s questions but only provided further confusion. Finally, to almost defend their lack of information given on *No Man’s Sky*, Sean Murray said, “Whenever devs are tight-lipped, it’s normally just because they literally, legally, can’t talk about a thing. Man, you would be surprised how wrapped up most devs are in contracts and nonesense” (seanymurray, 2016). Nonetheless, whether Sean Murray was under contract or not, his unwillingness to address any of the core questions gamers had about *No Man’s Sky* was consequently unethical according to Grice’s (1989) quantity category of the cooperative principle.

Quality

For the quality category, both submaxims—do not say what you believe to be false nor claim that for which you lack evidence—were violated by Sean Murray and Hello Games as well. First, there were many examples that seemed to occur as a result of Sean Murray’s ignorance of *No Man’s Sky*. For example, in the prerelease Twitch livestream of the game, Murray states after blowing up an asteroid, “If you blow a hole in something, it will stay like that forever” (hellogamesofficial, 2016). Though Sean Murray did not seem like he was trying to be ingenuous or deceitful through his remark, the statement was still false as holes in the planet, minerals, and even asteroids would reset after a player walked far enough away. Thus, Sean

Murray's false response could likely be attributed to his lack of adequate knowledge about the subject at hand which would be a violation of the category.

However, there were also times where Sean Murray and Hello Games presented content in their advertisements that was downright untruthful. For instance, in Hello Games' "Survive" trailer, there is a red monolith-like structure that was actually not present anywhere in the final product of the game (PlayStation, 2016c). In the same trailer, audiences could see a space station visible in the sky from an on-planet character which is also something that did not make the final cut into the game (PlayStation, 2016c). Had these images been presented at an E3 conference maybe a year or two before, it probably would not mean as much; however, Hello Games inserted these visuals into their trailer just a week and a half before the game was released and three weeks after the company had "went gold [sic]" (Murray, 2016a) which means they probably should have known whether certain content was going to be in the game. Upon closer inspection, I realized that these false images were actually noticeable in previous interview footage presented back in April that year (Murray & Carboni, 2016) which indicates Hello Games simply rehashed their previous advertisements to sell *No Man's Sky* without first making sure everything in the ads was still an accurate representation of the game. Therefore, whether these mistakes presented were due to Hello Games lacking appropriate evidence to support their claims or whether they simply were claiming that which they believed was not true, they violated the quality category of the cooperative principle.

Relation

Hello Games' breach in the relation category can best be evidenced by the fact that no one seemed to know what the game was actually about until after its release (Bleich, 2016; Crossley & Corriea, 2016; JeuxVideo.com, 2016). Rather than strictly answering interviewers'

questions by keeping his responses pertinent to their inquiries, Sean Murray, instead, seemed to find a way to avoid ever addressing what people really wanted to know—especially in the case of the five categories of missing content. For example, in an interview with Gamespot (Crossley & Corriea, 2016), an interviewer asked Sean Murray what the story is in *No Man's Sky*; Sean Murray began by discussing the stories to many different games including *Minecraft* and *Terraria* before finally stating, “So the short answer to your question is, the through-line in *No Man's Sky* is your journey to the centre of the universe. But I think that's nonsense” (para. 13). He then resumed talking about the plot of *Super Mario 64*. By adding that qualifier at the end of his statement, Sean Murray never answered the question of what *No Man's Sky* is really about in the end which rendered the statement irrelevant. To further demonstrate Sean's irrelevant statements, however, Sean discussed frame rate issues in *No Man's Sky* in another interview that week (JeuxVideo.com, 2016). Specifically, that exchange went as follows:

Interviewer: We tried the game on PS4 a few weeks ago and there were rumors about frame rate issues. Could you tell us more about it since the frame rate on PS4 is clearly lower than on PC. Are you having trouble with the optimization on PS4?

Sean Murray: Eh, no actually, the, uh, the game, is, uh, coming together really well. Uh, like we're making a crazy game at a crazy scale, um, and doing stuff that technically hasn't been done before. Um, and for us, unlike most games, you can normally just create one level and make sure that everything's perfect and test every possible scenario, and that's not really possible with our game. Um, but every game I've ever worked on has, uh, you know, previously, has, like, had really solid frame rate and stuff like that, and it is something that we've uh, kinda always been good at really. (JeuxVideo.com, 2016, 1:51)

This response may, at best, address other games Sean Murray has worked on, but it never actually states anything relating to *No Man's Sky* frame rate issues. Thus, because somebody could not confidently answer the question, “Will *No Man's Sky* have frame rate issues?” using the supplied response above, it can clearly be argued that Hello Games’ advertisements violated the relevant category of the cooperative principle too.

Manner

Ultimately, however, it was the manner category that Hello Games seemed to avoid following that resulted in most of the manipulation in their advertisements. For example, their trailers often positioned non-playable character (NPC) ships flying by players in such a way to make it look like players could interact with factions more than they could (PlayStation, 2016a; PlayStation, 2016b; PlayStation, 2016d); there was even an instance where three ships were seen docking in a space station at the exact same time (PlayStation, 2016b, 1:13)—something not present in the game—that seemed to promote to players that they might be flying in sync with those NPCs, or even, that those ships might belong to three, separate players. These visuals essentially obscured the specific details of *No Man's Sky* so players would be enticed to buy the game without knowing what was actually missing from the final product.

The most extreme—and interestingly, most common—example of Hello Games’ manipulation of the manner category, however, was Sean Murray’s constant classification of multiplayer being an option present in *No Man's Sky*. Basically, players wanted to know if they would be able to find, interact with, or even just *see* other players in the game. They mostly received answers claiming that, because the game’s universe was so big, the chances of players seeing another player would be extremely small (Crossley & Corriea, 2016; JeuxVideo.com,

2016); however, an interviewer from GAMES.CH's YouTube channel pushed Sean Murray a little further on the issue. This is what their conversation revealed:

Interviewer: Speaking of exploration, uh, just, uh, there will also be a multiplayer about the game, but since this universe is so large, there's pretty little chance you will actually be meeting people?

Sean Murray: Well, it's interesting actually, so it's not really a multiplayer game; that's not really the way to think about it. Like, there are...like...like you were saying, there are...infinitesimal chances of, you know, very very small chances of you even coming across...a place that another player has been to, right?"

Interviewer: Yeah, I was thinking about it, like, finding footprints of someone, like, he once was there, so I can see there was someone there?

Sean Murray: So, the way the most likely thing that's gonna happen is that you are going to come across a planet and some other player has been there, and they've named that planet, and the creatures, and, and, I'm sure they've given it a good name...something sensible, and they haven't just named it after themselves, or, you know, parts of themselves. (laughs) Something like that, right? Uh, so, uh, that's probably the most likely thing that will happen and we actually have ways for you to, like, try and search for a path toward them. So, there's that side of the game. Um, but actually the chances of two people crossing paths are incredibly small, and so, this, that's not what the game is about. Um, we have added little easter eggs and things like that and ways you can get a feeling of there being other people in this universe, but you're not like—definitely don't go into the game dreaming of, you know, *Call of Duty* deathmatch across the planets of *No Man's Sky* or whatever, you know? (Bleich, 2016, 8:00)

Rather than simply say, “No, there is no multiplayer in this game; players will not be able to interact with nor see other players in *No Man’s Sky*,” Sean Murray, instead, violated each of the categories of the cooperative principle with his statement above, and it would appear he did so simply to obscure the details so players would not have the information they needed to make an educated choice in whether to buy *No Man’s Sky*. Even when Sean Murray ultimately tweeted “To be super clear - No Man’s Sky is not a multiplayer game” (Murray, 2016d) just hours before *No Man’s Sky*’s release, minutes later he made kept up the façade by also tweeting “The chances of two player ever crossing paths in a universe this large is pretty much zero” (Murray, 2016c). Once again, instead of just saying, “No, two players cannot meet,” Sean Murray chose to be obscure by claiming that although the chances might be “pretty much zero” (Murray, 2016c), they are not *absolutely* impossible. Thus, because Hello Games’ advertisements lacked perspicuity, and because they were ambiguous, obscure, and unnecessarily prolific, they violated the final category of the cooperative principle, manner, as well.

Discussion and Implications of this Study

The initial aim of this study was to analyze Hello Games’ marketing strategy of *No Man’s Sky* and determine whether the company was ethical during their advertising. Consequently, with the results listed above, it would be difficult to declare anything other than that Hello Games was unethical. Even in the few short months of content I analyzed, the company ultimately managed to violate every one of Grice’s (1989) categories of the cooperative principle. They said too much—but mostly too little—they were untruthful, they offered irrelevant information, and in the end, they presented their product in ways that were meant to deceive their customers. They broke the trust of their company/consumer relationship (Alsamydai, 2016; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Murphy, & Lacznak, 2006; Ulusua, 2011), and the

imminent outcry from their customers demonstrates just how upset people were as a result of Hello Games' decisions (Cymen90, 2016; Hillier, 2016; PSA, 2016).

There are two questions, however, that I find still intriguing about this whole case: why did Hello Games decide to be so manipulative, and why were people *so* upset about *No Man's Sky* in the end. First, in discussing Hello Games' manipulative manner, it is apparent that the pressures surrounding *No Man's Sky*'s launch would have had an effect on the company. Sean Murray's remarks in his Reddit AMA post (seanymurray, 2016) also explain that Hello Games was under legal constraints with Sony at the time (seanymurray, 2016) which most likely restricted which details they were allowed to talk about pre-release of the game. Nevertheless, as Sean, himself, mentioned (seanymurray, 2016), developers face pressures and are under contract with every game, and yet, Hello Games was surprisingly far more secretive with the core gameplay mechanics of *No Man's Sky* than are most companies with their games.

Consequently, the evidence seems to propose that Sean Murray ultimately decided to adopt a dirty hands approach to promote the game. After three years of working on *No Man's Sky*, he had already sold his house to start the company, Hello Games, and made numerous other sacrifices with his colleagues to finish *No Man's Sky* (seanymurray, 2016). Thus, in 2016, when Sean was later pressed to confirm details about the game that were present in previous trailers, he most likely opted to get his hands dirty—as an “*agent*” of the corporation (Murphy & Lacznak, 2006, p. 3)—and mislead consumers by manipulating his responses to create the illusion that *No Man's Sky* was the game everybody wanted. This decision would save Hello Games and lead to one of the highest commercial success stories in gaming of 2016 (Kuchera, 2016). However, as the dirty hands approach dictates, there must also have been the other side of Sean's choice—the angry players who were lied to—that would serve as a consequence for Sean's decision.

Subsequently, this consequence proved to be more devastating to the legacy of Hello Games and *No Man's Sky* than Sean Murray probably could have ever anticipated.

This player resentment, then, leads to the next question I hoped to address: why were people *so* upset by this event? Games developed by these indie companies often turn out much worse than *No Man's Sky*, and yet people seem to acknowledge these companies' limited resources and give them the benefit of the doubt when playing their games. Even AAA-title companies such as Ubisoft (CrowbCat, 2016), Activision, and Bungie (Lehri, 2015) often manipulate customers in their advertisements, and yet, never has there been such a widespread and vocal uproar from players as there was for *No Man's Sky*. Thus, what about Hello Games and *No Man's Sky* was so different?

Although not the primary lens for analyzing this ethical situation, I offer a discussion of enthymemes as a possibility that led to such fan disappointment with *No Man's Sky*. Enthymemes have been discussed since Aristotle who argued they are “the most effective of the modes of persuasion” (p. 22). Basically, an enthymeme is a form of deductive reasoning that suggests when a speaker offers “few propositions” (p. 28) that are true, then they can also advance further propositions that an audience will deduce “must also be true in consequence” (p. 26) as a result of the initial proposition. For instance, if a speaker were to assert “good days are sunny” and then later state “today is sunny,” the audience would be left to fill in the final piece of info that “today is a good day”. Essentially, Aristotle argued the use of enthymemes to be the most persuasive tool a speaker could use because they allow audiences to persuade themselves by feeling they have reached the message’s conclusion due to their own critical thinking.

With this argument, then, Hello Games’ constant reliance on leaving customer questions unanswered may have ultimately been what caused such consumer upset. Because Sean Murray

never addressed the essential information players wanted to know about *No Man's Sky*, those players were left to make deductions on what the game was themselves. As a result of their own enthymematic conclusions, they most likely filled in the equation of what *No Man's Sky* was with what it was not; when they were told it would be nearly impossible to find other players, they probably determined that it could still be done. These interpretations would have resulted in unrealistic expectations of what really was *No Man's Sky*, and in the end, as Burgoon and Hale's (1988) expectancy violations theory would dictate, players would have been increasingly hurt when they found their expectations of the game had been violated in such a drastic way. Thus, if future evidence was found to support this hypothetical scenario, then the argument could be made that it was inevitably Hello Games' unethical decision-making to remain silent that resulted in one of the most disappointing games of all time.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study was that it is, in fact, an ethical evaluation. As such, many of the claims proposed were based on subjective evaluation which opens the door for an infinite amount of interpretations on the same data. For instance, who is to say Hello Games were wrong in the marketing strategy for *No Man's Sky*? Ultimately, the profits from their sales would indicate that *No Man's Sky* was a commercial success (Kuchera, 2016). However, it is through the weakness of ethical studies' subjectively-based analyses that they find their greatest warrant for future study: the ability to debate what is *right*. When studying cases such as Hello Games', when would be the appropriate date to begin holding Hello Games accountable for their claims? Should Hello Games be required to state whenever a certain feature has been removed from their future games, even when such a statement would inevitably destroy their chances of successfully marketing those games? Were Hello Games unethical? It is only through the

debates of such subjective evaluations that people can become informed and have the power to base their own standing.

Having said that, there are an abundance of future research topics still available on the ethics of video game marketing. As I mentioned above, it would be interesting to examine just how much enthymematic rhetoric a campaign might contain before it oversteps the boundary of being ambiguous and unethical. Conducting a comparative analysis between Hello Games' marketing of *No Man's Sky* and the marketing of larger, AAA-companies could also potentially yield other interesting results. Might gamers have been more hurt by Hello Games because it was such a small company and they felt like they parasocially *knew* Sean Murray and his crew whereas larger companies are simply viewed as monopolistically, impersonal monsters where such deceit might be expected? Answers to such a question might be just what future indie companies need to help them avoid the devastating consumer-backlash that was *No Man's Sky*.

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