An Analysis of Game Theory's FNAF Crisis and Communication

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Introduction

In today's internet culture, influencers come a dime a dozen. However few have been around for as long as a decade or more. Matthew Patrick (aka MatPat) and his associated YouTube channels have been around for nearly 13 years amassing over 40 millions subscribers combined. On his main channel, Game Theory, some of their most popular videos are the ones they put out talking about the Five Nights at Freddy's series. If you know anything about The Five Nights at Freddy's video game franchise then you know that things can get complicated quick, which is exactly what happened when MatPat put out a video with a call to action for his viewers to look into the possibility of a hidden alternate reality game (ARG) out here in the real world, as opposed to just being in the games or books. This led to private businesses being harassed, private information being shared online (doxing), and no actual ARG even surfacing. MatPat quickly put out a second video explaining the situation to the masses and asking them to STOP, but by that point, a certain amount of damage had already been done.

Literature Review

This issue begins with Matthew Patrick (MatPat) of Game Theory fame releasing a new video on the possibility of a hidden Five Nights at Freddy's Alternate Reality Game (ARG). Since MatPat has a limited degree of capabilities in that field, he calls out to his audience to investigate this in hopes of unearthing said ARG (Patrick, 2022). The videos Game Theory puts out on the FNAF series as a whole, tend to be very lore focused so this makes sense. Adding to the fact that MatPat has actually done this kind of thing before. However, this "quickly led to local businesses receiving hundreds of calls from Game Theory fans and private information being posted online. This transformed the ARG hunt into mass harassment and doxxing, so MatPat is asking fans to immediately stop the ARG hunt" (McNulty, 2022). In MatPat's follow

up video he also goes in depth talking about how the ARG format lacked process and boundaries. He helped outline a few protocols for future ARG related activities (Patrick, 2022).

MatPat's follow up video is, however, a good example of the lengths that he and his team will go for when it comes to achieving a level of expertise. This can be seen all across his channels but another example could be the three part series on the Disney Death Count. Where he calculates the approximate number of characters who have died in over 60 different Disney movies (Patrick ,2022). They way that they find the numbers reach a level of expertise that shows just how much they care. Like using historical and geographical locations, or using advanced computer programs to count the number of bodies on a mountain.

We also use the diffusion of innovation model to help explain the medium of modern day entertainment and the rise of ARGs. This is split among five categories - innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (LaMorte, 2022). Where innovators and early adopters are the ones to catch onto the product/idea first. The early majority are the ones to popularize it. Late majority catch on a bit later. And the laggards do not accept it until very late. This idea also can tie into knowing your audience or your public. This mostly encompasses the different publics like latent, aware, and active publics. Latent public being those who are not aware of the specific opportunity. Aware public being those who are knowledgeable of the opportunity but do not do anything. And active public being those who are aware and act upon the opportunity (2021).

Additionally, this overall idea of public engagement can also factor into the different types of media marketing. Mainly we will be focusing on owned media, the media that you put out and that directly belongs to you. Like how the two videos MatPat put out on the FNAF ARG were directly put out by them. Meanwhile any article published by someone other

than the Game Theory channel would be earned media. Owned media can be useful because you can delegate exactly what you want to put out there. On the other hand you have no way of manipulating how the public might interpret said content (2022). Then it starts dipping into earned media territory. Where on one hand, you get free engagement. And on the other there's little to no management on the initial interpretation, leaving it open to either good or bad feedback (Santiago, 2018).

Although a good thing to understand before you publish any media is corporate social responsibility (CSR). There are four main types of CSR, environmental responsibility, ethical responsibility, philanthropic responsibility, and economic responsibility (Stobierski, 2021). Environmental responsibility has to do with anything relating to keeping the environment as healthy as possible. Ethical responsibility involves anything having to do with ethical practices and the rights of those they affect. Philanthropic responsibility consists of aiming to make the world a better place. And economic responsibility is a practice of putting all financial decisions to a commitment of supporting good outcomes. However, when it comes to the MatPat FNAF ARG issue, philanthropic responsibility has a lot to apply here. As you may deduce, the outcome was not exactly something that made the world a better place. That may have been the aim but it did not succeed. But an example of successful philanthropic responsibility could be Walmart's Resource Donations. Where Walmart sends refrigerated trucks out across the country to feed those who are without food (2022). Meanwhile, there also may be a few emerging CSRs like diversity and inclusion, governance, well-being, employee engagement, and supply chain (2022). Each of these tackle another aspect of CSR relevant to today's business practices.

Case Study Investigation

In MatPat's response video it is obvious to see that he and his team would value expertise and honesty the most when tackling this issue. Let us go into expertise first. You may have noticed that extra emphasis was previously put on the fact that this was not exactly MatPat's first rodeo when it comes to ARG's. And it is true, MatPat and his team have delved into several if not at least a dozen of popular ARG's on the internet. Not only that, but the Theorist channels, MatPat, and his team are infamous for doing an insane amount of research per video that goes up. For example, on the sister channel Film Theory they had a three part video series calculating the total death count for the 60 of the Disney theater release films. And they use some pretty unconventional means to find those estimations. But all this is to say that they value the expertise put into the research or any other method used to find those results. And it was no different in this ARG snafu. You can see this in the response video when he points out the lack of protocol and makes a quick five bulleted list of things to consider when delving into an ARG. And when it comes to honesty you can just look at the definition of it according to the PRSA: "We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public." The response video MatPat put out is the embodiment of this definition because it simply exists; the fact that they released anything at all addressing the facts, shows that they care about this. It also goes into the nature of the protocols that MatPat mentioned in the video. Things like not trespassing on private property and sticking to publicly available information.

A communication theory that would fit quite well with this scenario would be the diffusion of innovation. This theory involves how something can go from a rarely used product to an everyday product. This diffusion is split up into five categories: innovators, early adopters,

early majority, late majority, and the laggards. Take the smartphone for example. People already had mobile cell phones when smartphones came onto the scene so it is not like the market was erupting for demand. However, you had very influential innovators and early adopters that popularized it. Inside this diffusion of innovation model you have to pay attention to whether or not a product becomes popular enough on its own, or even replace a current counterpart to it. We can look at Netflix for this, it almost crushed Blockbuster into obscurity - it replaced a counterpart in its own market. Meanwhile you have all these other streaming services nowadays like Disney+ or Peacock, but they do not crush or replace Netflix because that innovation is not big enough and they are not exactly better. Meanwhile take a look at ARG's, they do not have a market other than other games that exist, so they are starting from a bare market. ARG's had been floating around since the early 2010's but did not really get fully fleshed out until the mid or late 2010's - right around the time that YouTubers and gamers started paying attention to ARG's. They are our early innovators and early adopters. This FNAF ARG hunt was the tipping point into the early majority since someone with so much influence was making it available to and informing the bigger public. But like every product, not everything is perfect off the bat.

Corporate social responsibility, at its core, is no different from the responsibility of one person. You can take one person selling sunglasses at the mall and adhere the same responsibilities to a behemoth sunglasses company. They might be on different economic levels, but they have the same environmental, ethical, philanthropic, and economic responsibilities. Both companies have to make sure the features of the sunglasses are truthful. Companies nowadays have to be transparent in all that they exhibit, whether that be the products they sell or the company mission.

Now lets translate this over into the Game Theory/MatPat FNAF ARG scenario. Although it is not a one-for-one comparison, there is still a lot we can pull from this. The point of environmental responsibility does not really apply so we can go straight to ethical responsibility, and this is a huge one to look at. Ethical responsibility here has to do with everything involving upholding human principles and human rights. This is a big deal encompassing issues like discrimination and injustices. In the FNAF ARG example we can see that there were several things that MatPat points out that were violating the ethical responsibilities they are expected to uphold. Part of the problem was because the medium of entertainment is so new that there were no rules or codes of conduct to follow - as mentioned previously. Regardless, MatPat makes a good comparison in the main video saying that if you are going to call Domino's, make sure you are calling about buying some pizza, not to ask if their kitchen is haunted by spooky animatronics. This would be a violation of a business's right to choose who they deal with. And the biggest violation here is the posting of public information, a clear case of a violation of privacy. Hence MatPat making an image repair video addressing all these points.

Economic responsibility also does not really apply to this scenario so we will stick to finishing this up with philanthropic responsibility. This pillar of CSR has to do with how an entity might spend its resources on making the world a better place. As is the case in many of his videos, MatPat simply wanted to entertain his audience and to get them involved in another game. This obviously backfired but you just look at all of MatPat's previous videos to see that he only cares about entertaining the masses and getting the facts straight. The video where he addresses the outcomes of the ARG hunt and also asking them to stop, is a very good example of good philanthropic responsibility. MatPat has mentioned before how long and how much funding it takes for videos to be released on a weekly basis. And although this was not a highly edited

video, it shows that he and his team went out of their way to get this video out there as soon as possible to try and clean this mess up. MatPat is able to use the same influence that started the fiasco, to end it.

When we look at the MatPat/FNAF ARG Hunt under the lens of PESO model, (paid, earned, shared, and owned media) we can immediately pick out two that apply. First we can ignore both paid and shared. Paid media does not really stick out in this scenario since it is not like Game Theory was paying people to talk about their mistakes. And although shared media might apply a little, it does not apply as much as earned and owned media.

Let us first take a closer look at owned media, the media and content that you directly own and make public. In this case it would be things directly owned by the Theorist brand like their merch department, live streams, and of course the YouTube channel. This does not look so good for Game Theory at first because that original video encouraging everyone to go out and look for the hidden ARG is owned media. They put out the video themselves and are making money off of YouTube's monetization system to generate revenue for the company. It is not the best appearance. And according to one of my sources below, that can be a big drawback. Because you put it out, you own it. But that also means you have to be responsible for everything that stems from that video. On the other hand, this can be just as much of an advantage as it is a disadvantage, which is exactly what MatPat does. As mentioned before, just a day or two after that first video went up they uploaded another one stating everything that happened. MatPat apologized to the people who were affected, urged the hunters to stop, and gave them a set of guidelines for the future. And the people did stop. And society has moved on. But guess what that second video is - owned media.

Now we move onto earned media, the biggest media to affect this event. Earned media is just as it sounds, all the extra ancillary talk around the media about your thing. This is all the free advertising when someone sees an ad for a product and then they tell someone else about the ad. Or simply talking about it online and spreading the word. Which is exactly what MatPat was hoping for when he released that first video, he just ended up with way more earned media than expected. The other source talked about three drawbacks to earned media which is as follows: 1. Negative Earned Media. 2. No Control Over Earned Media. 3. Earned Media is Difficult to Obtain. Point three does not apply here and point one was taken care of because they got to it so fast. In fact the earned media from the second video is probably what helped get the fans to stop the hunt even more. But it is point two that is the biggest factor here, *he lost control of the earned media.* It is just a fact that it is impossible to control what the public does and says at all times. In this sense however, it worked too well, people got too invested and overstepped. The excitement and effort ran over the edge of the cup and MatPat had to do his best to clean up the spill. MatPat did a wonderful job in the second video since he had no idea what the earned media of the first video was going to be. It is probably due to his many years of not just being a personality on the internet, but all his time analyzing various media on the internet as well. In the words of Farmers insurance, he knows a thing or two, because he has seen a thing or two.

In the MatPat FNAF ARG hunt debacle, we are most concerned with the active public. This is the part of the audience who are aware of the message or issue, and act upon it. Of course, this would be the people who called businesses in a harassment-like nature, trespassed on private property, and spread sensitive information online. Like described in the article, they typically have a high level of involvement, think their actions can affect the outcome, and

actively seek information and act on it. All things we see in the aftermath of the ARG hunt, thus putting them firmly in the active public category.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the MatPat FNAF ARG hunt illustrates the power and pitfalls of online influence in the realm of modern media. Matthew Patrick's decade-long presence as an influencer and content creator on platforms like YouTube showcases a commitment to expertise and thorough research. However, the unintended consequences of a call to action for an alternate reality game (ARG) revealed the challenges associated with navigating uncharted territory. The diffusion of innovation model highlights the transition of ARGs from niche to mainstream, accompanied by the responsibilities influencers bear in terms of ethical conduct and corporate social responsibility. MatPat's response, emphasizing expertise and honesty, reflects an attempt to mitigate the negative impact of the ARG hunt, demonstrating a commitment to rectifying the situation. The case study also underscores the importance of media ownership and the challenges posed by earned media's uncontrollable nature. As the incident unfolded, it brought attention to the active public—individuals who, with high involvement, sought to impact outcomes, illustrating the need for influencers to navigate their responsibilities in an evolving digital landscape.

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