

Ethics of Early Access and Pre-order Games

Maya Anderson

J351

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To what extent do video game developers/publishers have an ethical obligation to deliver their promises?

Video game development is a fairly lucrative profession with a large audience of consumers waiting for the next hit. The gaming industry is estimated to make \$152.1 billion worldwide this year. By 2022, the market is expected to grow to \$196 billion (Global Games Market Report, 12-13). However, one large lapse in video game development is when developers produce products that are not reflective of what they promised or do not complete their products at all. This paper will analyze various motivations for this behavior via two case studies, determine the ethical dilemmas and principles at play, and ultimately determine a resolution for the issue.

A common trend among video game developers is to allow their audiences to buy their games before release via early access or pre-order them. Early access allows customers to “purchase the public beta version of a game while developers continue working on the game using the raised funds” (Lin et al. 2). They are expected to eventually release like any standard title. Unlike pre-orders, early access games can be played immediately while in development. This allows developers to receive feedback and make changes. Steam, the most popular computer game store platform, began releasing early access titles in 2013. This allowed developers to fund their projects and receive criticism before an official release. They are not necessarily *promised* to be complete, though a significant portion of early access games are abandoned. Players participate in them, eventually expecting a finished product. Of the first 50 early access games released, 32 of them have ceased development (Lin et al. 3).

Worlds Adrift is an MMO (massively multiplayer online) title which released in early access on Steam in May 2017. It was made by the indie developer Bossa Studios, meaning a small, usually startup team. It was an open world game in which players could craft airships and fly them

around an environment made up of floating islands. What set the game apart was that it was the first to offer persistence in its physics, which meant that the world reacted to players' actions (Paprocki 5). Everything a player did, like cutting down a tree or crashing a ship, would remain in the world. This required the use of SpatialOS, a fairly new engine built for multiplayer games. Like most early access titles, players encountered several bugs and unbalanced mechanics. During its course of development, 30 updates were released, adding fixes and new content like natural bodies of water and airship furniture (Paprocki 8). However, an unexpected announcement was made on May 29, 2019 stating the game would soon be shutting down. Only those who had purchased the game between April 29 and the announcement were able to receive a refund. For others, only in-game cosmetic purchases could be refunded, though they were given copies of two Bossa games: *Surgeon Simulator* and *I am Bread* (The End of Worlds Adrift 25-26). Players were able to play the game until it shut down on July 26, 2019, though the closure ensured several planned features were never implemented.

Unlike early access, pre-ordered games are not typically played during development. Johnson and Luo define a pre-order as “placing the order for a game before that game is actually released, ordinarily paying a premium in order to play a game immediately upon launch” (Johnson & Luo 5). When a consumer pre-orders a game, they are purchasing a product they typically know little about. The study notes that while trailers and previews can be viewed before release, they do not provide much detail. Trailers ultimately present a vision of a game that may not be represented in the final product (Johnson & Luo 6). Despite the potential for disappointment, pre-orders are quite advantageous. In 2016, the top five pre-ordered console games amounted to over \$1.3 billion (Johnson & Luo 5). They are said to account for 20-30% of a game's revenue. The interviewed subjects reasoned this purchase behavior by saying they were motivated by the rewards generally

provided with pre-orders (Johnson & Luo 6). These are benefits like physical merchandise, concept art, in-game cash or cosmetics, and a variety of other rewards that are only available to those who pre-order. This creates an “arbitrary scarcity” and propels game sales (Johnson & Luo 7).

Anthem, a game developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts (EA), is an open world shooter in which players can team up to fight enemies in armored flight suits. It released February 22, 2019 and offered several pre-order bonus packs for different versions of the game. A standard edition, worth \$60 included in-game items and access to a demo, and the limited edition, worth \$80 included a digital soundtrack and extra in-game items. (Reed 7-8, 12-13). It initially excited consumers in 2017 with a teaser trailer, later followed by a gameplay video (Gach 2). BioWare is also supported by fan-favorite franchises Dragon Age and Mass Effect, which likely spurred pre-orders. Though upon release, the trailer and gameplay video appeared to be a completely different version of the game, with significantly reduced graphic quality and contrasting gameplay mechanics (appendices G-J). Ben Irving, the lead producer of *Anthem*, described the game as a “living, shared world” (Gach 13). Enemies were designed to actually walk about the world as if they really did live there. Instead, they appear via magic portals. Missions are limited; they were advertised to be flexible, with players able to start other objectives as they pleased. Now, they are bound to complete their current mission before starting another (Gach 8-9). Gach described it by saying, “It can be immersion breaking, a reminder that you’re not exploring somewhere that’s lived in, but rather just killing stuff until an objective is fulfilled...” (Gach 10). *Anthem* players swarmed Reddit to air their complaints, claiming the product they had bought did not reflect the gameplay footage.

Examining these two cases make it clear that any developer can produce a product that was not promised or complete. Of the top 35 public gaming companies are notables like Activision

Blizzard, EA, and Nintendo (Global Games Market Report, 27). These companies are known for their popular releases like *World of Warcraft*, *FIFA*, and *Super Mario*, all of which have made their developers millions. They are backed by thousands of employees, several investors, and years of building up a good reputation. As a result, they have knowledge, experience, and funds that many indie developers just cannot match. In the case of *Worlds Adrift*, funding was a significant reason as to why the game shut down. Henrique Olifiers, co-founder of Bossa Studios, said the cost of making a multiplayer game can cost four to ten times more than a traditional single-player game (Paprocki 4). He followed this by saying, “We found ourselves devoting the majority of our development resources to make the game simply work, with little left to making it a better game” (Paprocki 8). Bossa was the first to create a game using SpatialOS, which meant they were encountering problems no developer had dealt with before (Narula 19). Olifiers claimed this resulted in less interest in the game, and thus less players. Furthermore, many were put off from the game due to “griefers,” those who used the game’s mechanics to ruin fun for others (appendices A-C.)

A starting package for SpatialOS is about \$360 per month for 100 players on a 2.8km² map. This package is for more restricted environments and does not include the same persistence physics *World’s Adrift* offers. The game’s map is more than 1000km², which is more than 35,000 times the size of the base package’s map size (Narula 11). Based on those figures, the cost of running the game’s servers every month was in the thousands. This was a feat Bossa thought it could overcome with its player base. However, those who bought the game were only a third of Bossa’s initial estimation (Paprocki 9). Olifiers concluded by saying, “If we didn’t believe we could take *Worlds Adrift* into such a future, we wouldn’t have started the project” (Paprocki 6). *Anthem*’s case

is a bit different. Despite being backed by a large company that made \$5 million in 2018, the company could not deliver what it originally promised its audience (Newzoo 27).

Behind the scenes of *Anthem* are extensive corporate issues, even down to the name of the game, which changed from *Beyond* to *Anthem* mere days before its announcement in 2017. This was a decision even staff were confused about, questioning what the title *Anthem* meant for the game. *Beyond* implied the player would have to leave the safety of their fort and explore the wilds, while *Anthem* did not create the same imagery (Schreier 2-3). This is said to be indicative of a volatile development process, in which several features were rushed and implemented mere months before the announcement (Schreier 4). One BioWare employee said they experienced several “stress casualties” where staff would be overwhelmed with stress to the point of leaving for one to three months (Schreier 10). Causes for this stress were several shifts in leadership, engine issues, poor communication, numerous changes, and increased pressure from EA to meet their deadline (Schreier). BioWare wrote a blog post responding to outrage about the game’s development, saying, “The struggles and challenges of making video games are very real. But the reward of putting something we created into the hands of our players is amazing. People in this industry put so much passion and energy into making something fun” (*Anthem* Game Development 3).

Various stakeholders have a place in a game’s development, realized or not. This is not limited to just the developers or publishers but includes investors, the player base, and game enthusiasts. Stakeholders also include outside developers, publishers, and investors. When other developers and publishers receive backlash for their work, it can influence the way others perceive the entire industry. With words like “cash grab” and “abandonware” being used to describe games, this behavior creates a more cautious gaming culture that may not be as supportive of such

ambitious projects. Trust is imperative for any business, and when games fail to meet expectations, trust decreases. This could result in less enthusiasm for the industry, further impacting the variety of games produced.

The main ethical dilemmas these two cases present appear to be short-term vs. long-term and individual vs. community. Bossa appeared to be aware of the financial burdens of running a game on a new, costly engine. They wanted to get players interested in the game early on to support its development, though the result was a game that could not sustain itself. When the debt caught up with them, Bossa had to deal with the potential consequences of their final decision. Shutting the game down would result in an angry player base and likely hurt their reputation, while letting the game run any longer would only increase their financial burdens. They settled for a middle ground, allowing players to enjoy two more months of the game before shutting it down. It inevitably led to discontent (appendices D-F) and likely increased their expenses, but it seems they did this in the best interests of the community that had grown around the game. They put themselves at risk for the sake of allowing players to enjoy the game a bit longer. While Bossa is a UK company, they did follow the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) code of ethics when handling this dilemma. Honesty is one of six values listed in their code, evidenced in Bossa's actions when they were transparent with their audience about the game's closure (PRSA Code of Ethics 8). Loyalty is another value, displayed when they put the interest of their community above their own (PRSA Code of Ethics 11). They did their best to do right by their player base, though simply bit off more than they could chew.

On the other hand, BioWare prioritized the short-term and themselves with *Anthem*. Rather than continue development until the game was in the state it promised its audience, it decided to push for a deadline it could not realistically meet. Had the developers weighed the consequences

and been upfront with its community, events likely would have unfolded differently. Instead, they prioritized their own needs above the needs of their players, hurting both parties in the process. Even in their press blog, they did not mention several of the development issues stated in Schreier's article by the company's own employees. They go as far as contradicting the statements, saying, "We put a lot of focus on better planning to avoid 'crunch time,' and it was not a major topic of feedback in our internal postmortems" (*Anthem* Game Development 2). Despite this, Irving deemed their actions were transparent in his response to *Anthem*'s disparities. He said, "There are a million reasons why you set out with an idea and it evolves over time. This is common in every game. We shared as much as we could. Some things change. So the cost of transparency is that some things we said become not true, not because someone was dishonest but because it changed over the course of development" (Gach 17). Irving is not wrong; games can change significantly over time. Yet these changes were not discussed, leading to a disenfranchised audience. Honesty was not a priority in this case, and neither was loyalty – despite integrity being listed as one of the company's first values. Perhaps this is a value they should be working to put into practice.

World's Adrift and *Anthem* are only two cases representative of larger issues in the gaming industry. No one enjoys watching a game fail – so what can be done to mitigate this? Firstly, communication is key. When put to good use, it can dispel confusion and disagreement. Developers and publishers need to be upfront with their audience and their teams at *every* stage of a game's development. Each party should also be willing to listen to one another; BioWare's own employees had gone unheard, leading to a series of problems. However, developers and publishers cannot be held solely responsible for a game's failure. Consumers should be willing to get involved with a game's development. This means providing feedback for improvement, being active in the community, and spreading the word. One key problem for *World's Adrift* was that it simply was

not bringing in the player base it needed, largely in part to players who set out to ruin fun for others. Great games need great players – players who are willing to come together rather than create division. Had the community been more inviting, outsiders likely would have been encouraged to get involved, too. Crowdfunding and programs like EA originals which fund independent developers are also making strides to support game developers. Even Epic Games, despite the controversy surrounding its store, offers developers a significant portion of profits from games sold on their platform. Developers have also turned to other ways of supporting its games with microtransactions – purchases that can be made in-game – and subscription-based business models. This allows consumers to receive benefits for playing the games they enjoy most. There are several other ways the industry has attempted to support developers so that they can make great projects, and hopefully these are trends that will continue to grow.

Video game developers and publishers do have an obligation to follow through with their promises. Like any other industry, they should be committed to releasing a product befitting its advertisements. Though as evidenced by examining these cases, there are several issues that may impede this. It is up to all parties – developers, publishers, consumers, etc – to get involved so that the industry can continue to grow and evolve. Still, this case study prompts further questions about the integrity of rewarding pre-orders, as well as the unpaid labor of participating in early access games. Research should continue to investigate the ethics of these topics.

“Anthem Game Development.” *BioWare*, 2 Apr. 2019,

<https://blog.bioware.com/2019/04/02/anthem-game-development/>

This blog post from BioWare’s website is a direct response to the Schreier article, which talks about some of the issues that occurred during Anthem’s development. It makes some interesting contradictory points, straight from the company who made the game.

When anyone is receiving critique or there are two sides to a particular issue, both opinions should be covered. Readers would want to know how BioWare felt development went when employees had expressed such discontent. The SPJ guidelines would also encourage getting their stance on the matter.

Gach, Ethan. “Anthem: The Promise Vs. The Reality.” 8 March, 2019. Kotaku,

<https://kotaku.com/anthem-the-promise-vs-the-reality-1833156436>

This article provides more details of some of the disparities between Anthem’s footage and the final product that was presented. It comes from the perspective of someone who was genuinely interested in Anthem and played the game firsthand.

Readers should get an idea of an issue from more than one perspective. Getting insight from someone who lived it and experienced some of the problems can provide an invaluable opinion. This adds a bit more color to the paper, putting the reader in the position of someone who felt deceived.

“Global Games Market Report.” Newzoo, 18 June 2019,

https://resources.newzoo.com/hubfs/Reports/2019_Free_Global_Game_Market_Report.pdf.

This report explores various trends in the gaming industry. It breaks down revenue by platform and country, explores and redefines definitions, and even ranks top companies in the video games industry. It has presented the most in-depth capture of the gaming industry as a whole that is available for anyone to view.

The information from this report will help provide an understanding of the overall impact of the video game industry. It provides numerical context while also defining helpful terms and listing key events throughout 2018.

Reed, Chris. "Complete Guide to Anthem's Preorder Bonuses." IGN,

<https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/02/08/anthem-release-date-collectors-edition>

This short article simply described the pre-order benefits that were available for Anthem, as well as the price range for the game.

Benefits are often associated with pre-orders, so this expands on the Johnson and Luo study by giving more context for why people might buy the game early.

Schreier, Jason. "How BioWare's *Anthem* Went Wrong." 2 Apr. 2019, <https://kotaku.com/how-biowares-anthem-went-wrong-1833731964>

This article provides quite a bit of detail about a lot of the background issues behind Anthem's failure. It goes in depth with interviews from several employees who shed light on the volatile development of the game.

To understand why Anthem failed, readers need to understand what went on behind closed doors. From an outside perspective, it is near impossible to know what happened. This article

sets a framework with which to develop solutions to some corporate issues that even the biggest companies encounter.

Johnson, Mark R., and Yinyi Luo. "Gaming-Value and Culture-Value: Understanding How Players Account for Video Game Purchases." *Convergence*, vol. 25, no. 5–6, Dec. 2019, pp. 868–83. *SAGE Journals*, doi:[10.1177/1354856517743667](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517743667).

Pre-ordering, along with early access games, is one of the most common ways for a gamer to be disappointed with a final product. This article explores the relationship between gamers as consumers and video game developers as media producers. It explains why people pre-order games and the role of capitalism in the gaming industry.

Conducted via several interviews, the research sheds more light on motivations for gamers to buy an unfinished product. It helps give the paper more background on the community the issue at hand actually affects.

Lin, Dayi, et al. "An Empirical Study of Early Access Games on the Steam Platform." *Empirical Software Engineering*, vol. 23, no. 2, Apr. 2018, pp. 771–99. *Springer Link*, doi:[10.1007/s10664-017-9531-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10664-017-9531-3).

This article specifically targets the early access trend in the gaming industry on the most popular online store platform for PC games (Steam). It addresses several advantages and limitations of the model, as well as how it specifically works. In addition to this, it also provides statistics for early access games on the platform.

The role of this article in the paper is to again provide more context. Linking to *Worlds Adrift*, which was initially released as an early access title on Steam, this source can add

more depth to what goes on behind the scenes of early access games and educate the audience on Steam's platform.

Narula, Herman. "On the New Worlds in *Worlds Adrift*." *Improbable*, 30 June 2017,

<https://improbable.io/blog/on-the-new-worlds-in-worlds-adrift>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019

This article explains more about the work *Worlds Adrift* is doing with the game engine SpatialOS. It provides details about the game such as its scale and physics. The fact that Bossa was the first to utilize this engine holds significance – they were working on uncharted territory.

These details are critical to understand other issues the developers encountered while making the game. Again, with more insight, readers can recognize some of the outside factors that led to the game's closure.

Paprocki, Matt. "Bossa Studios' Cofounder Speaks Openly On *Worlds Adrift*'s Closure." *Forbes*,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattpaprocki/2019/06/17/bossa-studios-founder-speaks-openly-on-worlds-adrifts-closure/#548482a9dd0f>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.

The article explains why *Worlds Adrift* shut down through the eyes of Bossa Studios' cofounder. It addresses various motivations, issues, and some of the thought processes the staff were encountering.

This is necessary context for any reader to get a full understanding of the issue. When more details are given about what the developers had hoped for the game and why it had to close, readers can begin to understand that creating finished products may not be as straightforward as they think.

“Pricing.” Improbable, <https://improbable.io/pricing>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.

This page provides details of how much the SpatialOS engine costs. As finances were a major factor in *Worlds Adrift*'s closure, this is a necessary piece of information to consider.

Comparing the base package prices with how many resources *Worlds Adrift* actually required can clue readers in on some of the difficulties developers may face when creating games. It puts their financial burden into perspective.

“PRSA Code of Ethics.” PRSA, <https://www.prsa.org/about/ethics/prsa-code-of-ethics>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2019

The PRSA Code of Ethics outlines ethical guidelines that any public relations professional should follow. It details not only specific values, but also provides a code of conduct regarding various topics.

As this paper focuses on specific companies rather than news sites, it made sense to use the PRSA code of ethics rather than the SPJ guidelines. They provide the audience with a standard of behavior for any public communication.

“*Worlds Adrift*” https://store.steampowered.com/app/322780/Worlds_Adrift/. Accessed 18 Nov. 2019.

This is the store page for *Worlds Adrift* on Steam, which provides reviews and an overview of the game. Many users were upset about what felt like an abrupt closure. Reviews also discussed “griefers,” players who tend to ruin fun for others.

The reviews (included in appendices) allow readers to see how the community responded to the game's closure. Their stance needs to be understood to know the impact of Bossa's decision.

“The End of Worlds Adrift.” *Worlds Adrift*. <https://www.worldsadrift.com/>


This is the site for Worlds Adrift, addressing various questions regarding the game's closure. It is an official communication that provides details in one concise place.

Key details regarding the game's closure, such as when it happened, how refunds worked, and why it happened are listed here, providing more context for the paper.

Appendices

Appendix A

58 people found this review helpful
3 people found this review funny

 **Not Recommended**
0.0 hrs last two weeks / 37.0 hrs on record (30.9 hrs at review time)

Posted: Aug 25, 2017 @ 1:47pm
Updated: Aug 26, 2017 @ 9:44am

EARLY ACCESS REVIEW

Great game ruined by terrible rust style PVP mechanics.

If you are fed up with Rust you will hate this game just as much, if not more.

Be prepared to spend hours building a ship only to have it destroyed in seconds by a fully tiered griefer with no way to defend yourself.

Appendix B

As other posts have stated there is a lot of griefing currently going on in World's Adrift. With the current game mechanics the anti-social few can easily ruin the experience for a great many players. I am not talking about being attacked and losing a fight. That is PVP, and this is definitely a PVP game (there are no PVE servers at all) and I knew that when I bought into early access. I am talking about being attacked by higher level players in or near the starting zone which I have no chance of actually fighting against. Now, before ya'll assume I am just some lost carebear, know this. I like PVP games in general and am willing to take my knocks when playing and learning a new game. With each death you learn something about the game and it's mechanics. You stop making newbie mistakes and get to where you can hold your own in a fight. That is the fun in PVP. That is not this game.

Appendix C

However, after a while of playing, I've found that dealing with griefers is near impossible, and not at all balanced or interesting for the receiving end. You can spend hours of work putting together a ship, just for a couple of people to glide in (gliders are a near-end game item btw, and vets can take them into beginner areas) and drop time bombs all over your engineering, and blow up your ship for no gain at all, just for the hell of it. If they did it to try and steal your stuff, that would be fine, but doing it just because you can just adds insult to injury. And from what I understand, PvE only servers aren't planned at all, so you are always at risk of losing hours upon hours of progress within a few minutes at most. Until something is done about this, I say stay away, unless you're one of those players that enjoys destroying other people's work.

Appendix D

Paid \$60 on the captain's pack which wasn't even finished. There were promises that they would give the extra content originally included to captain founders as the game was being developed.

How can they just shut the whole game down? What did I pay for? This game had so much potential. I ♥♥♥♥♥ loved it, but now what was it for?

I can't even run my own server or play single player. They straight up got rid of it.

They gave me I Am Bread and Surgeon Simulator...

Combined those games are about \$25, and I never wanted them in the first place...

What a scummy move by Bossa.

Appendix E

I for one won't be touching another bossa product after this.

You can't just bail on a product leaving it unplayable without expecting it to completely fk your reputation.

As far as I'm concerned, if you knew you were shutting it down, the decent thing to have done is make it hostable by other people. Because as far as I'm concerned, you're now officially a scam and actually making Star Citizen look good.

Appendix F

This is absolutely disgusting. They had a very promising product but because they failed to deliver on any of their ambition or promise the game died down and they remove any and all ability to play it. Shameful.

Appendix G

Anthem's populated town area in the demo.



Appendix H

The same area in the game's release.



Appendix I

A shot from the gameplay trailer.



Appendix J

The same action in the final release.

