

SIMULATION SENSEMAKING: THE *BUSINESSWEEK* APPROACH TO EFFECTIVE DEBRIEFING

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ABSTRACT

A significant issue in the conduct of simulations is the creation of an effective debriefing experience. This suggests that the experience gained in the debriefing process is as critical as the simulation itself. Just as simulations attempt to reflect the real world, so too should debriefing experiences. In this exercise, students are asked to avoid the traditional outcome of translating their simulation experience into an end-of-semester tome. Instead, they are encouraged to produce a product that better reflects the contemporary, active business world. As opposed to a format appropriate for explaining their experience to a professor, the students use a form designed to appeal to shareholders and other stakeholders. In particular, students are asked to recount and explain their simulation experience in the form of a product that has the look and feel of a BusinessWeek magazine article. This paper explains that process.

INTRODUCTION

Various research efforts have examined the use of simulations and their impact upon student learning. The efforts have looked at pre-game activities, team composition, pre-briefing, and instructor intervention as they impact team performance (cf. Biggs, 1975; Faria, 1986; Faria & Nulsen, 1975; Fekula & Ritchie, 2006; Nulsen & Faria, 1977; Schreier, 1977; Snow, Gehlen & Green, 2002). Despite game performance outcomes, one concern that remains the same and is whether participants are learning anything from their experience in the simulation and how we assess learning. Debriefing is an issue because we use it not only to confirm learning, but also to enhance the learning process. The objective of this exercise is to extend the learning process beyond the simulation by continuing the experience even after the game has ended.

Unlike traditional papers in which students recount their experiences for consumption by a professor, in this exercise students must remain in the simulation mode by presenting their experience in a format suitable for shareholder, stakeholder, and general public consumption. The format for this assignment is a popular-press magazine article. In particular, *BusinessWeek* is chosen because it commands the largest subscription of all magazines in the category of business periodicals ("Top Circulation Magazines," 2007) followed closely by *Forbes* and *Fortune*. Although magazines like *Money* have nearly twice the

subscription, that publication is classified in the personal finance category. The decision to use *BusinessWeek* ensures a more general stakeholder view ("No. 5 *BusinessWeek*," 2004).

Despite the many successful efforts of experiential exercises to reflect reality, it is interesting to note that *BusinessWeek* is not extensively used as an experiential tool. In ABSEL work it is generally referenced in support of arguments or used for actual data related to simulations. In the Bernie Keys Library (BKL) there are at least 60 documents referencing *BusinessWeek* accompanied by 83 distinct citations. Some uses include the traditional citation of topics to support arguments in a paper, such as increased PC usage or decreased company operating costs (cf. Chiesl, 1986). Uses more closely akin to ABSEL work include reference to the *BusinessWeek Index* as a means to link simulation games to the real world economy (Arellano & Hopkins, 1992; Biggs & Halpin, 2004; Hall, 1987; Hsu, 1994; Keys, 1987; Keys & Biggs, 1990; Larson, 1985). In other cases, faculty and students are encouraged to access *BusinessWeek* to supplement course exercises requiring particular information about real industry outlooks and company profiles (Forte, Maddox, & Boozer, 2000), company rankings (Sauaia, 2001), industry overviews (Vik, 2006), and the economic health of an industry or company (Specht, 1980). Regarding the development of experiential work on particular firms, scenarios are drawn from *BusinessWeek* (Fritzsche & Rosenberg, 1989), as well as firms selected for comparative study (Huse, Parks & Lindstrom, 1994). When the focus shifts to particular concepts, recent and voluminous business case data is found in *BusinessWeek* (Gulezian, 1981).

Another level of integration involves the use of *BusinessWeek* as a material component of a simulation or experiential exercise. In one case involving marketing, *BusinessWeek* served as an input for magazine media in a marketing simulation data base (Cannon, McGowan, & Yoon, 1995). In another case involving the emotional reaction to layoffs, *BusinessWeek* supported the theorized reaction of students by citing similar examples from the business world, thus supporting the viability of a "simulation within a simulation" (Hsu, 1998, p. 284).

Professors have also recommended the use of *BusinessWeek* for the following general pedagogical reasons. Unlike some academic journal articles, the applied articles found in *BusinessWeek* and similar publications are understood by students with average reading skills (Badly & Murtuza, 1988) and provide a less-structured approach for exposing students to important concepts (Scott, 1977).

Students have been required to scan *BusinessWeek* for articles relevant to class discussion (Rosensaft, 1982) and the magazine has also been used as a reward for performance in classroom exercises where top students received free subscriptions (Newstrom, 1989).

Finally, students are documented as stating that different strategies seen in *BusinessWeek* allow them to apply concepts from textbooks and courses (Zahrly, 2001). *BusinessWeek* is a “colorful . . . quick read” (Zahrly, p. 250) that informs students about actual businesses and events, which allows them to participate in discussions.

So, *BusinessWeek* has been employed in a variety of ways in the classroom. The proposed exercise uniquely applies *BusinessWeek* by having students write an article, as opposed to reading one. Just as they engage in the operation of a company through a business simulation, they extend their experience in the simulation by reporting the processes and outcomes of their experience in a commonly referenced, real-world format. While one approach in strategy courses is to analyze companies by reading cases, this exercise requires the students to write about their own company as they experienced it. For weeks or even months they have made decisions, analyzed outcomes, and performed their own actions. Now, as part of the debriefing process, they must recount those decisions, actions and outcomes in a living form. This approach extends the simulation beyond the game itself, like a simulation within a simulation (cf. Hsu, 1998). It supplants the traditional post-game paper or presentation by keeping students in the simulation mode.

DEBRIEFING

Debriefing has long been an issue of concern in simulation and experiential learning (Markulis & Strang, 2003). There are content and process aspects to debriefing (Hunsaker, 1978). While the content perspective focuses upon the outcome of the game, the process view keeps the simulation going through the post-game. Debriefing should be customized for an optimal learning experience (Dutton, 1979) and the idea of a *BusinessWeek*-like article provides the opportunity for students to weave a plot and theme that is unique to their company, while still discussing the customary facts associated with every team’s experience in the simulation. This means that each team’s article will be different because it is based upon their experience, while retaining the commonalities among teams that are essential to all stakeholders.

One critique of debriefing indicates that some experiential learning exercises do not define the process or state the goals of debriefing (Markulis & Strang, 2003). In contrast, the *BusinessWeek* article approach offers specific guidelines with the stated goal of extending the simulated learning experience into the debriefing process. As an example, while some approaches successfully employ an external review board to evaluate students’ performance (Rosenthal & Werner, 1992), the approach proposed here is to have the students create their own board of directors and describe it in the article. Although corporate governance is not an explicit part of the simulation game, these criteria

extend the realm of the simulation by ensuring the coverage of all significant course topics within the simulation process.

Students are directed to write, as well as present the article for debriefing purposes. While the traditional class paper is research-based, this article is experienced based. In order to cover all major course concepts in the paper, some research work beyond their simulation experience is required, but the article is based largely upon the events of the game. Although the media bias found in magazine articles can be replicated in students’ articles, the students must still defend their position according to the results of the game. The remainder of this paper presents the process for doing this.

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

One of the goals in teaching strategic management is to offer a capstone experience for the business curriculum. A variety of methods are used to achieve that, but the main component of the process is to conduct a business strategy simulation game in which students make numerous decisions involving the major business fields of finance, accounting, marketing, operations, and management. The other goal in teaching strategic management is to ensure students are exposed to the various and significant business concepts which apply at the strategic management level of a company. In order to integrate the simulation experience with the course concepts, the final project requires students to apply the major strategic management concepts, as well as to examine their experience in the simulation game. Because the nature of the simulation is largely quantitative, it does not address the more qualitative aspects of strategic management, such as leadership, culture and corporate governance. In these cases, students are asked to use the course material and conduct additional research in order to develop important components of their article that are not inherent in the simulation game. The other components the student articles are based upon the events and facts about the game, as the students experienced them.

Table 1 indicates the basic strategic management concepts as they are found in mainstream strategic management textbooks (cf. Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2007). The *Business Strategy Game* (BSG) (Thompson, Stappenbeck & Reidenbach 2007) gives students hands-on experience with the strategy simulation concepts listed in Table 1. The goal for the students is to ensure that the topics listed in Table 1 are addressed in their article. In doing so, the students not only debrief their experience in the simulation, but show final evidence of exposure to the major course concepts. The Appendix offers a sample of the handout given to students.

ANATOMY OF AN ARTICLE

If all student teams produce an article that covers the topics in Table 1, then that is not enough to provide a distinguishable experience for students or a customized

TABLE 1
List of Typical Strategic Management Course and Strategy Simulation Topics Coverage

Strategic Management Concepts	Strategy Simulation Concepts
1. The External Environment	1. Industry Overviews
2. The Internal Environment	2. Industry Benchmarks
3. Business-Level Strategy	3. Financial Statement Data
4. Competitor Analysis & Competitive Advantage	4. Company Operating Reports
5. Corporate-Level Strategy	5. Competitive Intelligence Reports
6. Acquisition, Merger and/or Restructuring Activity	6. Strategic Group Maps
7. Cooperative Strategy	7. Marketing
8. International Strategy	a. Segments
9. Corporate Governance	b. Pricing
10. Organizational Structure	c. Sales composition charts
11. Strategic Leadership & Culture	d. Advertising and celebrity endorsements
	e. Style and quality rating & trends
	8. Performance measures: EPS, ROE, Stock Price, Credit Rating, Image Rating

debriefing process optimal learning (Dutton, 1979). The richness of the experience revolves around the theme and plot that students weave into their writing in order to reflect upon their experience in the game. This is where the *BusinessWeek*-like article is an asset. The anatomy of a *BusinessWeek* article allows the writer to express the story of their experience without getting bogged-down in the details, while still providing a means for presenting those details. It frees the student to cover all of the material, but do so in a way that is more creative and alive than traditional course papers. Instead of worrying about compliance with MLA or APA style, students are given a copy of *BusinessWeek* in class and asked to peruse it. Then they are told to make their final project look similar to a *BusinessWeek* article accompanied by the content of Table 1. The anatomy of the article follows.

The key aspect of the article is the theme. Students should weave the subject matter of the course concepts and their simulation experience into the body of the article. They should also have a plot. Students should discuss the strategic plan employed when they began the game, as well as the course they charted throughout. The story portion of the article takes the form of either two or three columns per page, but the columns rarely stand alone. They are almost always interspersed with other critical and interesting information. But the key to this process is that the story remains unbroken. It is only when the reader chooses to peruse the other accompanying information that they do so. The same is true for the writer. The authors can focus upon recounting the story of their simulation experience without getting caught up in all of the detail, and they are encouraged to do it that way.

Two examples of the way a story can be approached follow. First, some students take the approach of describing what happened chronologically. The simulation has 10 individual submissions which represent 10 years of corporate performance. Since it is usually arduous to cover

10 years in 10 separate sections, many students opt to discuss year one since it is novel, followed by combining the discussion of years 2 to 4, 5 to 7 and 8 to 10. Regardless of sequence, students should discuss their approach to the game using as many of the course concepts as possible, such as environmental analysis, business level strategy, competitor analysis, competitive advantage, and international strategy. These cover at least five of the main course topics. In each case, they should explain the major decisions made, why they were made, and the substantive outcomes. In subsequent years, the teams should also explain how they reacted to the outcomes of prior years' decisions.

Another approach to the theme portion of the article is to describe the primary reasons for success or failure in a game. In particular, teams pursuing high growth strategies can be rewarded; however, the process involved in achieving a strategy is important. On one occasion a team assumed so much debt in order to grow that they never recovered during the game, even though the last two years showed a significant upward trend for them. In this case, the team spent the majority of their article discussing the topic of financing growth. They also acknowledged that they learned something about debt and bankruptcy, since they were technically bankrupt, even though the game allowed them to continue to play.

In another case, a first-place team focused not upon a chronological theme, but on how their balanced approach to market share and growth earned them a high rating and first-place finish. Finally, a mid-range performing team discussed their inability to grow in the face of opportunity because they refused to assume any debt. Although they did well in the game, they missed the opportunity to really excel.

In all cases, the teams are rewarded for being able to articulate their experience in the game. Since a portion of their course grade is based upon their rank-order at the end

of the game, some students feel threatened by the game and consider it unfair because they lose control over their grade. But because the debriefing process allows a separate set of points for their article, any team has the chance to almost fully recover a poor rank-order grade by effectively explaining their understanding of their simulation experience. Also, each team is required to present the essence of their article to each of the other teams in the simulation industry. This experience allows each team to understand why and how they excelled or fell prey to other teams.

In summary, the body of the article is most critical, but it is not the only critical information that must be shared. Since topics like diversification, merger and acquisition strategy are not explicit parts of the simulation, teams must build these concepts into the paper. Similarly, cooperative strategy, corporate governance, organizational structure, and strategic leadership and culture must be developed. Students have the option to weave this into the body of the paper, or address it in the other areas as follows.

BusinessWeek is characterized by a variety of presentation forms that offer interesting information, which readers deem tangential or critical, depending upon their needs. The various forms include bottom boxes, top bars, and inset boxes that appear in and around the body of the article. This information is usually makes use of eye-catching color, headlines, various fonts, graphics or pictures. A bottom box might be used to publish the contents of an interview from someone related the topic of the article (cf. Grow, May 21, 2007, p. 66). A top bar can illustrate the success of a few particular companies listed by name from

industries like the mortgage market (cf. Grow & Epstein, May 21, 2007, p. 67). An inset diagram can show an operational process, like that of an oil rig employing advanced well-digging technology (cf. Reed, May 21, 2007, p. 77).

Other insets boxes can include interesting information like “The ABCs of GiftCard Safety” (Woyke, January 15, 2007, p. 34) or statistics (cf. Farzad, January 15, 2007, p. 42), timelines (cf. Borrows, January 15, 2007, p. 30), and product types (cf. Carey, May 21, 2007, p. 40). In addition to top and bottom information, sidebars are used to describe actions taken or particular definitions like in the case of CEOs exercising options (Burrows, January 15, 2007, p. 65). A plethora of other information is found inset in various portions of the body of articles including photographs, maps, rules, lists, websites, statistics, and references to other articles. Figure 1 illustrates a sample of the positions of various types of insets.

In order to complement the thematic discussion in the body of the article, students are encouraged to use the various top, bottom, middle and side insets to display supporting information or strategy concepts not covered in the game or within the body of their text. Examples of this include strategic group maps, sales and revenue charts, EPS and stock price trends, market share growth or decline, advertising strategy, company-relevant photographs, leadership and governance structure, financial statement data, and other performance indicators. Some of this information comes from research, but much of it is available within the game so that the process of including it is relatively simple and not time consuming. Thus, students

FIGURE 1
Anatomy of a *BusinessWeek* Article

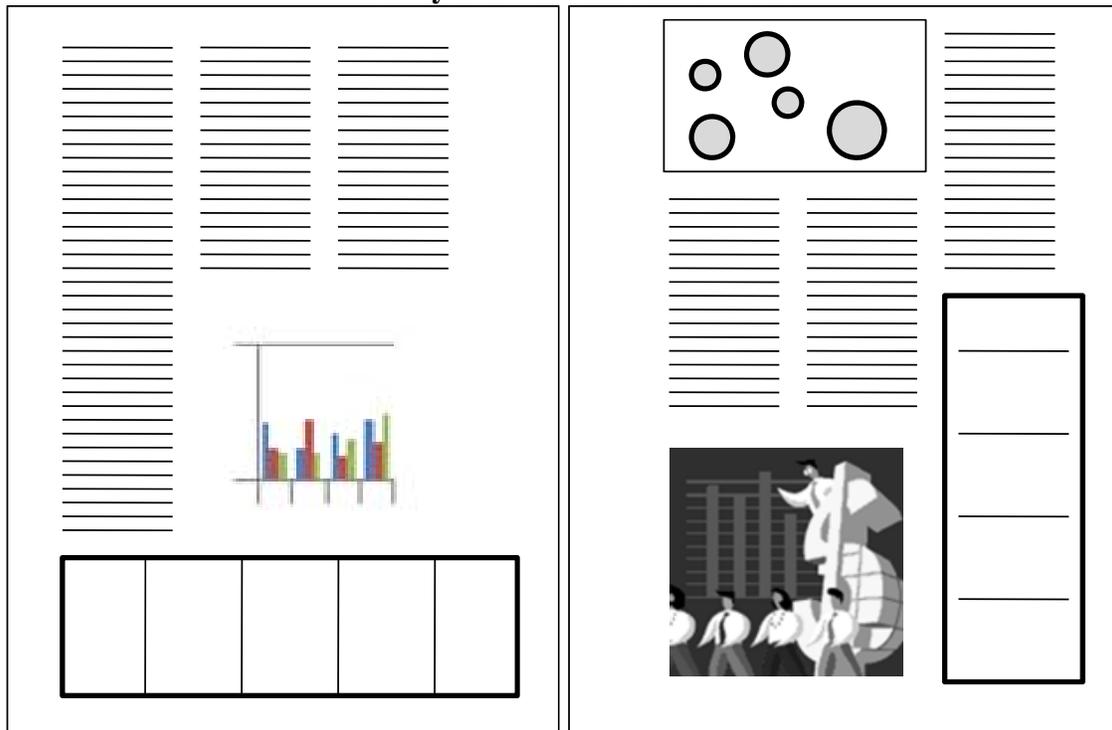
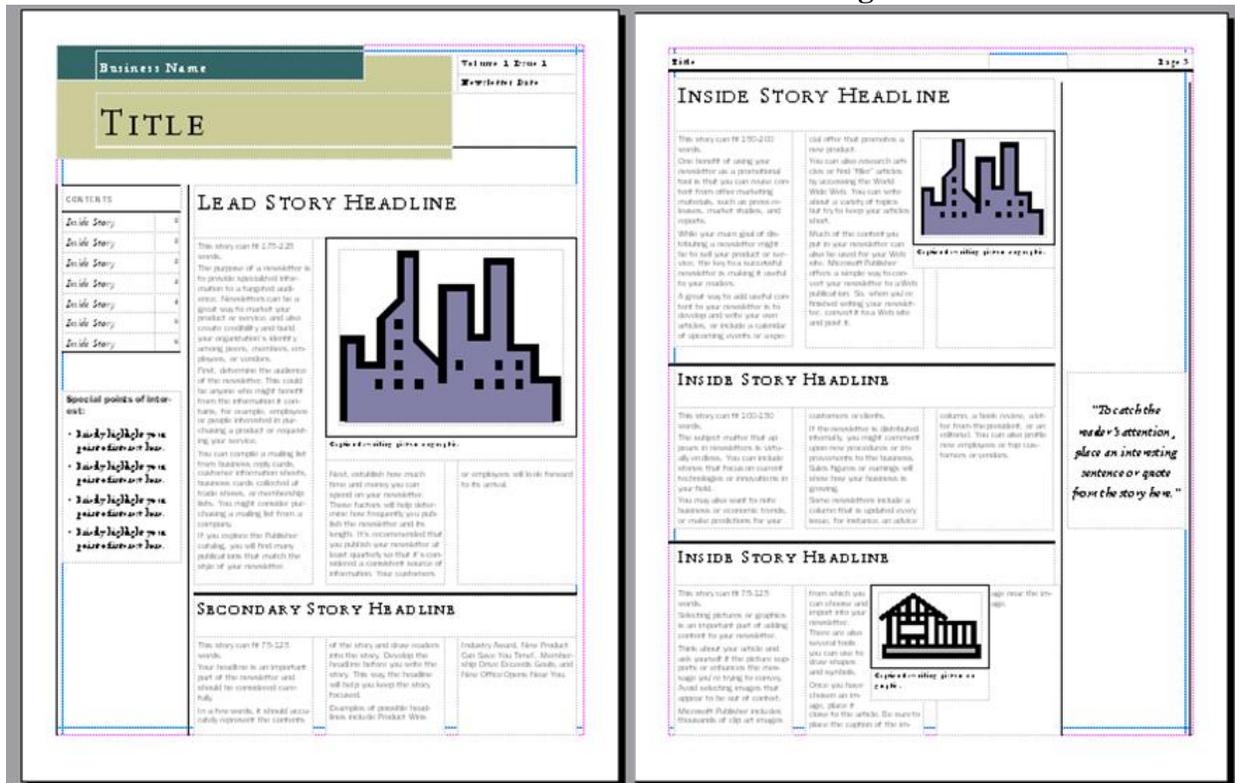


FIGURE 2
Preformatted Microsoft Publisher Pages



should be able to focus upon writing a high-quality article about their simulation experience without being hindered by peripheral, but essential details.

FORMATTING THE ARTICLE

Although the article can be produced in word processing software, it would normally be more time consuming. Thus, a software package like Microsoft Publisher is recommended since it will make the production of the article easier. Publisher is recommended because it has user-friendly templates. For those unfamiliar with the software, a quick lesson during class usually gets them comfortable with the process. It is often the case that at least one group member has used Publisher before, thus making the production process simple.

The focus of this project is upon the most expedient way to build an interesting product for both the reader and the writer. Figure 2 illustrates a preformatted template from Publisher. Each box on the page can be manipulated independently and students can insert the information relevant to their company. The text portion is weaved in and around the boxed material. This format is very much akin to the typical *BusinessWeek* article form. Students are encouraged to use color and other means to make it interesting. Since color printing is expensive, students can be permitted to submit their work electronically and present it in class using an LCD projection system. Some teams opt

to submit a printed copy because they enjoy seeing their final product in printed form.

THE FINAL DEBRIEF

As previously discussed, student teams present their experience in the game to other student teams that competed in the same industry. This process is important because students are able to discover the reasons for their performance in the context of other teams' actions. Although competitive intelligence reports are part of the game, it is still the case that teams do not know the explicit goals and strategies of their competitors during the game. This is analogous to the business world where companies have access to publicly available data, but will discover additional information about other companies through outlets like *BusinessWeek*. Every effort is made to keep team composition secret and it is often that case that teams in an industry are from different sections of the same class, so they would not normally know each other. This debriefing process extends learning not only for the presenters, but for the other teams listening since they can then begin to understand why their approach to the game succeeded, failed or fell somewhere in the middle. The advantage of a simulation like the BSG is that it not only accounts for team decisions, but uses those decisions in a dynamic environment to produce outcomes based upon the moves of competing teams. Thus, team results not only depend upon team decisions, but also upon the decisions

made by other teams, which constitute a competitive industry.

The *BusinessWeek* article format ensures that all teams debrief in a relatively uniform fashion that includes basic game performance and outcome data, while also allowing each team to express their unique processes and experience. It is through this unique theme approach that competing teams can place their experience into context and gain a greater understanding of the reasons for their performance outcomes during the game. Anecdotal feedback from students suggests that the process is not only interesting and unique, but very effective because they claim things like, "Oh, now I understand what happened to us." For example, in one experience, a team had been leading during the entire process until the second last input, when seemingly out of nowhere they lost their entire market share in the private-label shoe industry. Although they still finished in first place, they lost their Top-20 worldwide ranking in the game and were angry about what had happened. They also did not know why it had happened. The cause was one poorly performing team who had invested in growth that could not manifest itself in the market until about 80% of the way through the game. This team was able to capture 100% of the private-label market share through price cutting, which they did because they figured that they had nothing to lose at that point in the game. Although the top-performing team members argued that such a move did not reflect reality, they conceded to the fact that they had ignored the poorly performing team in their decision processes and did not see them as a threat. Both teams agreed that, whether they won or lost, the *BusinessWeek*-style debriefing process was a valuable experience because it enabled them to learn what happened and why. The team that learned the most seemed to be the team that excelled, but got surprised when they failed to pay attention.

In both cases, the idea of writing an article about their experience helped the students to focus upon the parts of the game where they really learned something through experiencing it. In one case it was steady growth, then a brief failure due to inattention. In the other cases it was over-investment and the inability to pay debt that led to a last place finish. They were able to show an upward trend at the end and they learned not to be reckless with debt.

Regardless of final rank, the *BusinessWeek* article approach gives teams the opportunity to salvage the grade associated with their game performance outcomes by being able to effectively describe what happened without getting mired in all of the financial, accounting, marketing, operations and management details. Since this is a strategy course, the idea of a themed article helps students to focus upon their experience in the game from a strategic management perspective, while still presenting all of the details in side bars and inset boxes. As world-renowned Harvard strategy professor Michael Porter states, "Managers must consider everything" (Argyres & McGahan, 2002). The *BusinessWeek* article approach ensures all aspects and stakeholders are addressed, while allowing student-managers to focus upon a theme and achieve the learning goals of a business simulation.

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APPENDIX

Final Project Guidance

A comprehensive analysis of strategic activities and experiences in the BSG: Each team will submit and present a written product that achieves the objective of describing their BSG strategy, process, outcomes, and experiences. This written product should be fashioned to “look, feel and read” like a BusinessWeek article. Thus, creative presentation style including a captivating title, interesting text layout and relevant graphics, tables and figures are required. The body of the article should weave a consistent theme describing your experience in the game. Bottom, top, middle, and sidebar insets should be used to illustrate essential information that is not necessarily part of your main theme, but both interesting and relevant to that theme. The content must cover all components of the company’s strategy according to the major concepts covered in the course and text, which include:

1. The External Environment
2. The Internal Environment
3. Business-Level Strategy
4. Competitor Analysis & Competitive Advantage
5. Corporate-Level Strategy
6. Acquisition, Merger and/or Restructuring Activity
7. Cooperative Strategy
8. International Strategy
9. Corporate Governance
10. Organizational Structure
11. Strategic Leadership

Content should not be limited to the list above. Both current events and information from a variety of functional areas such as marketing, operations, finance etc., could be important. For those areas above that are not specifically addressed by the BSG, teams should choose a real company in the athletic footwear industry and research those aspects of that firm. The information about the real company should be placed in a sidebar or highlighted box within the text of the article.

Good style mandates an appropriate introduction, summary and headings. The length of this effort should approximate the traditional 20-25 doubled-spaced pages; however, in magazine article form it should be about 8 - 10 pages. MS-Publisher is the recommended software for this project; however, the same objective can be achieved using MS-Word.