The Role of Videogame Reviews

How Critics Treat Videogames as Cultural Products

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Content

Abstract

The games industry is a young industry, but games journalism is even younger. Videogame reviews make up the largest share of games journalism, and these need to receive further study. The question this thesis deals with is if videogame reviews have attained a level of critical assessment that is comparable to other cultural industries and what their content can say about the purpose of videogame reviewers. The main components that will be studied are technical and aesthetic elements. Technical elements are non-evaluative and descriptive, offering the how and what of playing particular games. Aesthetic elements are the opinions and feelings the reviewer has about a game. Since reviews have only barely been studied, but are continually heavily discussed by the gaming community, some type of data is needed to confirm or deny the criticisms that reviews receive. Here 30 reviews are chosen because they form the top 10 most highly rated games of 2011. These were selected because of their propensity to move away from technical deficiencies and into critical discourse. The technical and aesthetic elements are further broken up into narrative, visuals, sound, gameplay and overall value and turned into codes that are applied to the text of the review. In addition, the context a reviewer provides is also coded. This includes the relationship of the game and its components to other media and to other games. The results show a highly differentiated image; though most clearly it is shown that overall there are almost an equal amount of technical and aesthetic elements present in the review. The gameplay is often more technical, but the other attributes of games receive more aesthetic attention.

Foreword

The motivation for writing this thesis came from my own love of games and the copious amounts of reading gaming news websites over the years. What started as a way to keep up with the latest games and finding new things to play has evolved into an interest in critical discussion and developing my own specific tastes. Special thanks go out to the following people. My mentor, Dr. Ton Bevers, for providing encouraging feedback on the progress of my writing. My mom, who supplied me with food and coffee to type several hundred words every day. My dad, who I could bounce ideas off of and have lengthy discussions with. My sister, for showing me that there are many career paths available after all this was done. My brother, Ewart de Visser, who instigated the idea to research something related to videogames before the Masters program even started and who supplied the wonderfully useful graphs from the raw numbers, a job that would have taken me forever to figure out otherwise. Finally, my girlfriend, who has been the one I kept going for to get everything done on time and who graciously allows me to share my love of games with her, provided there is a pause button that can be pressed at any point.

1. Introduction

1.1 About this Thesis

This thesis is about videogame reviews. It takes an approach to the study of videogames from the perspective of art and culture studies, where the study of critics is an essential element. Before the approach is further explained, a mention must be made of the larger category of game studies first. This field is comprised mostly of multidisciplinary areas that focus on games, but some universities do offer games studies programs. The areas it is featured in most prominently are psychology, sociology, education and media studies. The focus on videogames from the perspective of art and culture studies has only lately started receiving attention (Mäyrä, 2008: 4-11). There exists an eagerness among researchers to test the effects of videogames on users and society, and talk about the application of their principles on learning and work processes. There is much that can be said about the different directions game studies have taken, but the fact that it is so young seems to be something that has to be repeated in every study focusing on games so far. Discussing videogames as a field has only been done scarcely and there is still much work to be done, but enough has been studied that mentioning the work here would already be redundant. In much of the sources available on the topic, mention of the current widespread appeal of videogames and the size of the industry, turn almost into a trend. Often there is a chapter on what defines videogames in the first place. Videogames on their own as an experience have received plenty of attention and the amount of theories and conclusions continue to grow. An understanding of how videogames are created and appreciated, what defines games, discussions of genres, business models of the games industry, and the impact games have on our culture have all been addressed.

This thesis is not so much focused on the games themselves, but on the critics. So rather than use reviews to discuss the content of videogames, the reviews themselves are the object of study. There are a very small number of studies on videogame criticism, and they are often focused on finding out what reviews are comprised of (Zagal, Ladd & Johnson, 2009; Rewat, 2011). Yet the contemporary discussion on videogames scrutinizes the construction, function and integrity of these reviews heavily. This discussion is found on blogs and game news websites, but certainly not in academic research. Certain recent articles have brought some of the central issues reviews have as videogame criticism to light. The feeling seems to be that videogame criticism is not on par with criticism in other media, such as film and music. Though defining the purpose of videogame criticism is difficult, games should be looked at as art and should be reviewed as such, rather than provide an indication

of which games someone should buy (Thrower, 2012). Another view is that a distinction should be made between game criticism and game reviewing, as mixing the two leads to undesirable results due to conflicting purposes, such as critiquing the linearity of games in general and giving a linear game a lower score because of it (Klepek, 2012). One of the most pervasive current thoughts on videogame criticism is to implement close readings of the medium, which has thus far been considered a radical approach (Polanksy, 2012). Finally, Henry Jenkins points out that reviews "are also mostly organized around technical elements as opposed to the game's emotional impact or its aesthetic statement" (2005: 190). This is further echoed by Joseph Hilgard, who is even more specific about the construction of reviews and feels that they are rarely insightful (2012). These arguments form the background this thesis.

Because of these arguments against the way videogame reviews operate, they require further examination. There is little research about the construction of videogame critics reviews, and this is still in the early stages of exploration. This thesis takes a top-down approach, where the theory, derived from art and culture studies, informs the research, instead of trying to derive categorization from the reviews. The results will be placed next to an understanding of videogames that already exists in game studies, aesthetic theories, and the critique of current criticism approaches mentioned above. The purpose is to provide new insight, or at the very least a more nuanced view into the role of critics and the meanings they assign to videogames in their reviews. This means videogames will be looked at as a cultural product and an attempt will be made to determine whether reviews address them as such. In order to do this, aesthetic statements will be differentiated from technical or descriptive statements. From the results a picture will be created that best describes where videogame reviews stand, because it is not as simple as saying that the more aesthetic elements there are, the more the review is viable criticism. In any case, the research question will be as follows:

To what degree do videogame reviews possess aesthetic versus technical elements and what does this say about them as a form of legitimate critical art evaluation?

1.2 Scientific Relevance

The pursuit of researching videogames as art is something that has only started in the last decade. It is being described as a new art, most notably by scholar of popular culture Henry Jenkins, who uses Gilbert Seldes' description of lively art for cinema to argue for a reexamination of videogames aesthetics (2005). Though Jenkins is by no means the first, as

conferences such as the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) have also made attempts to expand the understanding of videogame aesthetics beyond how impressive the graphics look (Niedenthal, 2009). The understanding of videogame aesthetics is also thoroughly supported from the field of philosophy, where the potential of art in videogames that has been and can be tapped is enthusiastically expounded upon through copious examples. Central to this discussion is the dissection of narrative and emotion in videogames (Tavinor, 2009). A disadvantage of this type of literature, however, is that the examples that are being used are often fairly dated, or soon to be. Other art forms may not suffer as much from this scrutiny, but videogames are far less timeless, simply because it has such a recent background. A large history of games is unplayable because of old technology, and even discussing the past console generation means referring to games that are already archaic in their design and, most recognizably, their graphics. Though this point might be argued, another problem is that the same games continue to be discussed, even though many new iterations with improvements have arrived on the market. A quick glance at the most recent issue of the journal *Games and Culture* shows two research articles that have studied *World of Warcraft*, likely because it is the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) most people know about. But there are no articles about similar games such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, with its larger focus on narrative, or *Tera*, which implements more fluid tactical combat. Not to mention that a whole new genre, the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA), has gained incredible popularity in the last few years with games such as *Defense of the Ancients*, *League of Legends* and *Super Monday Night Combat*. What this shows is that games studies do not always keep up with the latest trends, despite the fact that the games industry is a rapidly changing business.

The role of critics of videogames is a topic that has received some attention, but not nearly enough. There are some examples of review analysis which were mentioned earlier, and there is even some cultural criticism that can be levied against them, such as gender representation in videogame reviews (Ivory, 2006). This type of research is often done to learn more about the content of videogames, and there is no shortage of games research as it relates to feminism, racism, homophobia and other sociological topics. Rather than delve deeper into what games are all about, games studies needs to be taken further into the direction of cultural significance. This thesis strives to get a picture of where videogame reviewers stand as critics in a cultural industry. Their role is part of a complex network involving artists, stakeholders and consumers (Debenedetti, 2006: 30). Videogame reviewers also operate in the realm of games journalism, which has to strike a balance between being

dependent on the games industry for information, but still provide perspectives that attract loyal readers (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). The videogame industry has not yet been thoroughly researched as an art world in the way that Howard Becker describes (1982). Though some works do exist that lay a solid foundation to capture the history and culture of videogames, such as *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008). Games studies are therefore mostly found in culture and media studies, but the link between art and culture studies is barely being made. There is lots known about the psychology of gamers and the content and value of the games themselves, but little about the type of artistic world games inhabit. There is also not a whole lot of critical writing on games in general, so reviews are the largest source of game criticism available. A formal procedure to evaluate this art has not been established and the purpose of game critics is only found in inductive and descriptive analysis. This thesis will use a deductive and qualitative approach to evaluate the purpose of critics. Much has already been said about this for literature, paintings, books and film, but videogames require just as much attention in this area. By no means is this thesis meant to provide a complete answer, but rather establish a way to begin looking at the development of videogame critics and place it in current discussion on videogame criticism. Instead of describing what the aesthetics of videogames are, this thesis begins by taking the components of videogame aesthetics first and then seeing how reviewers handle them. This thesis therefore serves as a pilot research to lay a foundation to further examine the purpose of reviews.

1.3 Societal Relevance

The games industry may be young, but it is a large sector. Whereas film, music and literary criticism have received their fair share of consideration, the influence and purpose of videogame criticism has received little attention. There are not even any clear indications on whether reviews shape consumer behavior in any way. But just like the film industry of today, the games industry is high-budget and high-risk. It is a 25,1 billion dollar industry, with between 200 and 300 million games sold every year (Entertainment Software Association, 2011: 10-11). The effect of videogame reviews on the market will of course not be examined here, but with so many consumers engaging in this type of entertainment, reviews play a large role as marketing instrument, and selection mechanism. Yet with the average age of game players being 37, it can reasonably be expected that more thorough criticism is desired. And as seen from the scrutiny reviews receive, mainly because they come from gaming press, it is important to take a closer look at whether the content is only there

for marketing purposes, or if there is some merit to their ability to evaluate the quality of videogame as a cultural product and as art. If videogames are cultural products, and not merely entertainment commodities, there are artistic and market values to consider that will certainly clash with each other. These values affect the business and marketing models, just like in film or books, where distinctions must be made between mass appeal and artistic integrity and niche audiences.

At the beginning of this year, a shift in funding and marketing games occurred that shows that the balance between artistic and market values matters a great deal more in videogames than has previously been reflected in current business models. From the middle of February until the middle of March, the videogame developer Double Fine Productions, along with documentary filmmakers 2 Player Productions, raised 3.4 million dollars to create a point-and-click adventure game, an older genre deemed too niche and unprofitable by publishers. Tim Schafer, the head of the company and creative lead, used the crowd funding website Kickstarter to set up a goal of 400,000 dollars for the *Double Fine Adventure*, and they reached this goal in the first eight hours since the launch of the project. It took 24 hours until the project had reached a million dollars in funds ("Double Fine Adventure," 2012). The gaming media was stirred up considerably by this new initiative that at once seemed to wholeheartedly avoid publishers, and create a middle ground for smaller projects. In addition fans could now have their own stake in a project, with marketing largely based on word-of-mouth and goodwill. Double Fine Adventure also received the largest amount of money any project had received on Kickstarter, an accomplishment in itself. The discussions about this project were mainly concerned with whether or not this project in some way threatened the publisher model of the videogame industry, since it is such a recent development, the success and potential of this model has not been analyzed academically, despite the fact that Kickstarter has been around for several years. There is a question of how sustainable the model is, but nonetheless there is a need from fans to create videogames that have more artistic freedom. Other projects such as *Wasteland 2* by inXile entertainment, headed by Brian Fargo, and *The Banner Saga* by Stoic show that the model can be repeated given the right reputation of the developer. The choice to start using crowd funding in the games industry rather than via publishers shows that the balance is leaning towards stronger artistic values over economic values. It is an example that shows videogames are certainly a cultural industry, though it has hardly been studied in this area.

It may already in some ways seem obvious that videogames behave according to cultural and creative industries due to the large on-line communities devoted to treating

games as a hobby, an artistic pursuit and as a means to develop social bonds, though it is uncertain if the reviews reflect this. Discovering the aesthetic values that are present in videogame reviews can either show that they are in line with the community and field, or that they somehow represent something separate from the larger discourse on games.

1.4 Thesis Question and Research Plan

Having established the relevance of videogames in research and society, the next step is to extrapolate the research question based on the setup provided in this introduction, preliminary assumptions about the state of videogame reviews, and expectations about what might be found in the data. This extrapolation is meant to guide the direction of the theory necessary to arrive at a suitable approach for the research method. Thus the distinction between aesthetic and technical elements of videogames must be made clear. The role of critics of cultural products in general, and as it applies specifically to videogames, needs to be examined. This role is only meaningful when videogames are addressed as a cultural and creative industry. It is also vital to establish the working definitions of terms used here. This includes what is meant by "videogames" for the purpose of this thesis. A justification also needs to be made for the examination of videogame reviews and what this means for the results. After all, using these reviews gives only one perspective on the current role of videogame critics and whether videogames are treated as cultural products. Though the reviews are not used to examine the content and purpose of videogames, these aspects do need to be covered for the establishment of a deductive approach. This deductive approach will involve a qualitative textual analysis of a selection of videogame reviews using closed coding that can be applied to any part of the text. Before the operational questions and hypotheses that focus on the parts that need further examination are laid out, the research question is repeated here as a reminder.

To what degree do videogame reviews possess aesthetic versus technical elements and what does this say about them as a form of critical and legitimate art evaluation?

Operational Questions

The terms in this question are not readily apparent and therefore it needs to be broken down into operational questions. This breakdown is most useful for the narrowing down the necessary theory and creating a method that encompasses these questions.

1. What are the characteristics of videogame reviews and how are they composed?
2. What are the aesthetics of videogames?
3. What are the technical aspects of videogames?
4. What does the ratio of aesthetic versus technical elements imply about the type of criticism videogame reviews possess?
5. What kinds of roles do videogame critics have in the videogame industry?
6. What constitutes legitimate art evaluation and how does it apply to videogames?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses serve to guide the results that are significant. These hypotheses are based on several expectations that come from prior reading and experience. They are as follows.

1. In general, technical elements are more prominently featured and discussed than aesthetic elements in the videogame reviews.
2. Certain types of games lend themselves better to aesthetically weighted reviews. For example, a racing game is less inclined to have an aesthetic review than an action adventure game.
3. The more commercial a website is, the more the reviews are technically inclined. In order from most commercial to least: IGN, Gamespot, GamesRadar.
4. The more aesthetic a review is, the better it supports that they are legitimate art evaluation.

1.5 In the Subsequent Chapters

The next chapter of this thesis will establish the theory that serves to support the research. A description of what videogames are and the industry they inhabit will be laid out. The way game journalists and critics are positioned in the videogame industry is discussed next. Most importantly, the aesthetic and artistic elements of videogames will be determined and given detailed attention. The third chapter will be about the data and methods used in the research for this thesis. The research method, the sample and the selection of reviews are explained in greater detail and the operationalisation for the qualitative coding is broken down. After this, a chapter will be devoted to the results and findings of the gathered data. The degree of presence of each of the codes will be shown and evaluated to see if any hypotheses can be answered. Finally, a conclusion will be offered that summarizes what this thesis has

accomplished and found. A discussion about the findings and the effectiveness of this thesis follows to gain a perspective on what the work done here ultimately means. In addition there will be suggestions for improvements and further research.

2. Theory

2.1 Introduction

A preliminary assumption about videogames stands at the foundation of the question posed by this thesis. Namely that videogames can be considered art. It is not the goal here to make bold claims about this subject, but merely to establish if videogames are treated as cultural products and to draw comparisons to art world. Henry Jenkins describes videogames as a new lively art, a definition he ascribes in order to argue that the type of art it represents goes against the grain of conventional definitions and notions of what is considered good art (2005:175-6). Grant Tavinor also sits at the forefront of addressing games as new form of art (2009). It's easy to see that this discussion is in its infancy, because the structure of these works serves to form a basic understanding of what videogames are, how videogame narratives operate, and especially include a discussion about whether the artistic potential of videogames has been reached. It is mostly the blogs that cover the latest developments and opinions on the subject of games as art, or they work with this assumption imbedded in their argument to provide critical assessment of particular elements.

However, the game culture, the relatively young history and industry have received their fair share of attention by scholars. A comprehensive work that outlines the major components of the field of videogames is *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008). It provides descriptive analyses and includes theoretical suggestions for understanding videogames. What is lacking in works like this one is the role critics play in the field of videogames. The descriptive works are mostly about the development of games and gamers themselves. The role of communities is described at length, but the role of critics and legitimate videogame evaluation remains noticeably absent.

In addition, the structure and design of games themselves, with suggestions for studying them, also receive adequate attention. This type of literature focuses on describing the components of games such as narrative and play and the conflict between and the interplay of the two. It also looks at the perception, motivation and effects of games (Klug & Schell, 2006). There is some overlap here with the literature in the paragraph above. The focus is mainly on the player in society and different descriptions as to what constitute videogames. The game content is analyzed in favor of actual contemporary discourse on games.

The discourse on and critique of videogame reviews is most often confined to editorials on blogs. These sources do not stay indefinitely available and mainly constitute opinions from knowledgeable members in the videogame field. Academic articles about

videogame reviews are scarce. Most of these are conference papers and otherwise there are some master theses that are starting to address the topic. Perhaps this is because game reviews have mostly been a part of the overarching branch of game journalism. Game criticism has had a hard time separating from game journalism, because sites and magazines often serve as buying guides. Yet they also generate interest and discourse about videogames (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009: 1). The games themselves have received some content analysis in the fairly unique Diverse Worlds Project, which analyzed 130 games. It can be criticized for the fact that only ten minutes of gameplay is being looked at in games that can last tens of hours and that researchers can lack necessary playing skills, two issues maligned by James Ivory about existing studies based on playing games (2006: 105). Yet it at least tries the type of content analysis that is talked about in the literature on game studies, and they manage to gain insight into the types of worlds, characters and narratives that exist in videogames, at least at a surface level (Brand, Knight & Majewski, 2003). Using game reviews to determine the content of games has also been done to, for example, look at gender representation. Here reviews serve as a way to analyze content in games rather than playing the games to do so (Ivory, 2006). The actual structure of the reviews has received even less attention, but there are some attempts at determining what type of content is present in these reviews. Some of the most useful data was found using open coding on reviews to see which themes were most prevalent (Zagal, et al. 2009). The nine themes that came out of this, description, personal experience, reader advice, suggestions for improvement, media context, game context, technology, design hypothesis and industry, provide a solid framework for what most videogame reviews address and can potentially be used to determine not only the aesthetic values of critics, but also the use of videogame reviews by consumers in future research.

So far this prior research already gives a basis for dissecting videogame reviews, though this thesis aims to discover whether the games are treated as cultural products and if they are legitimate aesthetic evaluations of games. In order to do this, parallels have to be drawn between the videogame industry and art worlds as presented by Howard Becker (1982). Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu provides some insight into the influence and purpose of critics on different modes of production of cultural goods, since for videogames the market oriented mode of production seems to be most applicable (1993). Both of these works say something about the relationship between critics and production. And this relationship is incredibly important in the videogame industry just as it is in art world. Especially media critics play pivotal role in the market success of cultural products (Debenedetti, 2006). Seeing

as the overlap between journalist and critic is so strong for videogame reviews, this link is all the more pertinent.

What follows is a look into how games are argued to be art, and what makes this type of media unique. Next the game aesthetics will be discussed next to aesthetic theories and broken down along its components. Having established videogames as cultural products in this way, the role of critics in art worlds will be compared to critics in the videogame industry. To connect these theories to videogame reviews, game journalism will addressed specifically to see what purpose it fulfills and how this influences the role of videogame reviews. Finally some expectations based on the theory will be laid out in order to bridge the theory and the research method.

2.2 Games as Art

Western society has often seen playing games as useless and unhealthy escapist entertainment, but there is also an argument that play is an important aspect of human life. Nevertheless, videogames are increasingly popular and are therefore a noteworthy cultural phenomenon (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008: 147). It is clear that videogames are culturally significant considering the increasing casual gamer market, strengthened by social media games and cheap or free offerings on smart phones. Though whether games can be art is still a point of contention, despite its thorough history and teams of people who have used the full extent of their artistic talent to produce them. It is no longer a black and white discussion, since the arguments currently lean more towards what kind of art games represent and what potential it holds. In *The Art of Videogames,* Grant Tavinor describes that because of significant technological advancements, games have been able to reach a level of fidelity that no longer places limits on what they are capable of accomplishing. Additionally, because of the internet, gaming experiences are shared on a larger level and have been able to create expansive communities. The artistic qualities that are most readily apparent are the visuals and the narrative, as designers, illustrators and writers all have important positions in the development of games. But what sets games apart is the gameplay, and this is where the most important expressive and aesthetic experiences come from (2009: 5-7). The difficulty in establishing videogames as art comes in part from the moral implications of interactivity, since a player has the opportunity to engage in making their character behave in violent ways. The link between violent behavior and videogames has been thoroughly researched, though not well-established, but videogames still do not always carry a positive image in society at large (8-9).

The way that games are defended as art is often done through the personal experiences of a player who is writing on the subject, the way in which Tavinor begins his book. Another approach is to lay out a host of reasons games should be considered art because they behave in a similar way to other art forms. An example of this is an essay by Aaron Smuts, who argues that "by any major definition of art many modern video games should be considered art" (2005). Both of these types of reasoning are problematic. The former speaks most to the people who already play games, because experiencing a game as art is not done by merely looking at video of it. The latter is often unfocused and touches on too many issues in defining art in general. Smuts tries to look at art theory for sports and games such as chess, but ends up arguing that the performance of games, the playing, is not where the art is found. Rather it is found in the making of games, which focuses on three distinct features. First, games allow audiences to be involved in the work of the artists, despite the fact that videogames are a mass art form. Second, games use a number of tools available to filmmakers to design a narrative, dialogue and cinematics. Third, videogames are starting to be featured in modern art museums and certain game makers are designated as respected auteurs (Smuts, 2005). By taking attention away from the element of play, Smuts is essentially merely comparing videogames to other art forms. But this does not hold up to scrutiny. Not every form of art available today has always had legitimacy. If the videogame should be considered art, this should be done on the merits of games themselves. A strong argument against videogames as legitimate art might in fact be that they are aping film too much, so the element of gameplay needs to be further emphasized. Because great games are those that successfully merge the narrative and visuals with gameplay and do something that any other form could not have accomplished.

What is more interesting then is to look at a philosophy of art that takes a certain direction and preference. Henry Jenkins compares the art of videogames to the lively arts described by Gilbert Seldes. He mentions that "Seldes consistently values affect over intellect, immediate impact over long term consequences, the spontaneous impulse over the calculated effect," a way of looking at art that aligns well with videogames. The forces of mass markets and popular culture actually require innovation and the pushing of boundaries (2005: 180-1). Considering games as art of course has implications for designing games, but it also has an effect on the understanding of popular culture and regulatory policies that aim to narrow the scope of artistic considerations (Jenkins, 2005: 176-7). The argument Jenkins makes is one that looks at what games offer on their own terms, and how this expands definitions and conventions of art.

All three approaches to considering games as art are important. These are the personal statement, in the case of this thesis as expressed by the reviewer, the perspective of games as a cultural industry, and the ability of games to provide immediate emotional experiences. Another important consideration is that the only way to say something meaningful about games being art is to have played a variety of them. People who write about games talk about specific instances that shaped their way of looking at them as art. These considerations and approaches are all wrapped up in the criticism of games.

Including gameplay, applying a host of art theories and increasing the value of popular art are ways in which the definition of art is expanded, and this can be somewhat problematic. Aestheticians are concerned with forming theories of art that are exclusive in order for the labeling of something as art to retain its prestigious meaning. Thus not everything can be called art (Becker, 1982: 137). In each of the ways that videogames are defended as art, this consideration is taken into account, and the authors concede that not all videogames can be called art. It seems that the institutional theory of art is at work here, which basically states that an artifact becomes art as soon as the art world confers this status upon it. It arose out of a need to continually adapt theories of art to include new types of works (146-9). It may appear that these three approaches are doing just that, by expanding definitions to include new types of art. This practice could of course somewhat undermine the label of art, since aestheticians mostly try to find the inherent qualities of the work that make it art, and not look outside the object.

However, the desire for games to be considered art is not simply to confer a label so it sells for a higher price, or to justify a canon. It is rather to have videogames be respected and appreciated by society at large, to avoid prejudices that affect gamers negatively, and spur on an attempt to tap into the full potential of what games can be. The most important quality of videogames as art, which is emphasized by the three approaches mentioned here, is the visceral emotional impact felt by the player. This quality seems to be most responsible in producing the need for aesthetic theories for videogames as legitimate art. A recent on-line discussion about the merits of videogames was sparked after a profile on *Braid* creator Jonathan Blow written by Taylor Clark said that "video games, with very few exceptions, are dumb" and that "it's tough to demand respect for a creative medium when you have to struggle to name anything it has produced in the past 30 years that could be called artistic or intellectually sophisticated" (2012: 2). Michael Abbott of Brainy Gamer countered this by arguing that Clark is too focused on the mainstream and completely ignoring entire genres. He therefore proposed that gamers respond with games that they consider to be smart and

why (2012). There ended being a large number of respondents with a wide variety of games being justified as smart for different reasons. These were compiled by the Brainy Gamer website in a Smart Game Catalog. As this discussion shows, gamers are very concerned about how their pastime is perceived, and they defend it by looking at what the games offer in themselves, and do not merely accept what the words of the critic are.

2.3 Game Aesthetics

Before breaking down which elements play a role in the aesthetic experience of playing videogames, the aesthetic experience itself must be defined. Sung-Bong Park provides a useful understanding because of the distinction he makes between subject and object. The player is essential to the experience of the game, because conveying what the game has to offer relies on interactivity. For games this is much more important than other media such as film and music, which can usually be absorbed passively. Park divides the aesthetic experience into three phases. The first is that an individual has a quality experience with an object. The second is that the individual wishes to explore the potential of the experience fully. And the third point is that the individual reasons what elements contribute to this experience and thinks critically about them (1993: 23). When looking at Park's argument for something like a painting, the process of going through these three steps seems overly cognitive. Even a longer experience such as a film or a music album often produces an aesthetic experience that hardly goes beyond the immediate emotional impact. But Park's definition of the aesthetic experience is extremely useful for videogames. Because of the interactivity, there is a cognitive process of exploring the quality of the experience and attempting to reach the source and boundaries of that experience. In open-world or sandbox games, the player is given such a degree of freedom that a large part of the experience is trying out all the different actions possible. A difficult element of Park's definition is that in the third phase, the individual "makes some critical remarks" about the experience. It cannot be expected that every lover of art is engaging with it on this level. But the discourse around playing games is always centered around how the game feels and why.

The notion of an aesthetic experience would usually apply to works of art. It is not necessary for an object to be art for there to be such an experience, but a discussion of the aesthetics of videogames will inevitably venture in this direction. A criticism that might be levied against videogames as art is that they are merely popular entertainment, and can be discounted as art based on the fact that they are mass produced and the idea that they are crude and unintelligent. Though this is a weak criticism, it does create room for certain

videogames not to be considered art (Tavinor, 2009: 174-5). Nonetheless, it is still important to consider popular aesthetics. Especially since ideas about art can be expanded to include everyday experiences. When John Dewey talks about art he is concerned with how isolated from human life it has become in museums and other institutions. He argues that in order for aesthetic theories to have meaning, they need to move away from compartmentalizing art and return to normal human experiences (2005). Dewey is talking about the conventions that are created when art obtains a classical status and its meaning is transformed from its original use, in the way that the Parthenon has been transformed from civic commemoration for ancient Athenians to great work of art today. In fact he says that for the aesthetic to be fully understood, "one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens" (4). The consequence for considering videogames in the classical sense of art may be that the fun is taken out, since entertainment is largely the intended purpose of most videogames. But Dewey seems to show that this entertainment aspect is especially worthy of study for the aesthetician. Therefore, analyzing videogames as art and discussing their aesthetics means that the basic motivations for playing need to be considered.

In order to preserve Dewey's argument for art to be connected to everyday experiences, it is helpful to look at why players engage with videogames in the first place. Fortunately this type of study has been done extensively. Play theories describe the motivations for engaging in games, and they can also inform the aesthetic experiences that videogames provide, because the gameplay is a central part of the experience. There are several key reasons players play games. The active involvement videogames provide makes the experience more visceral than other escapist entertainment (Klug & Schell, 2006: 92). Players may also wish to engage in scenarios where roles can be played out that a player would not have access to in real life. Examples of types of games that allow for this are war and sports games, where real events can be recreated, and scenarios can be played out that are different from actuality. Or perhaps a player is simply interested in surprising environments. Of course people also play to compete, and videogames allow for this to be done in a safe and organized environment where they can compare their results with others. Lastly, videogames can come in the form of for role-playing, which does not just include becoming a hero, but also allows players to explore relationships, which is slowly maturing in the industry (94-7). There is, for example, already a big difference between the conversation trees that need to be navigated in the *Mass Effect* series in order to have heavily censored sexual relations with a character, and the more straightforward brazen approach of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of*

Kings, where sex is part and parcel for the main character. What the play theory motivations show is that videogames operate on a unique realm of experience not available to many other media. The reasons for playing games and the aesthetic experiences desired are either closely related to existing real life experiences, or allow for history and fiction to become more relevant to the player.

There are several different ways of breaking down the aesthetics of games. One such breakdown is according to rules, geography and representation and number of players (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2008: 97). The rules are the limitations and the possible player actions that the game allows for. They are what set games apart from other media. A great deal of enjoyment can be had from interacting with and overcoming these rules. What emerges from them is gameplay, which is the way in which the rules manifest themselves within the representation of the game and whether the player is competing or cooperating with the system or other players (99-102). Geography and representation refer simply to the graphics and audio in the game. The graphics include the perspective of the player, the dimensions and the type of artistic style used (97). The audio includes vocalization, sound effects, ambient effects and music, which all play different roles in conveying actions, narrative and a sense of place (125). The number of players greatly affects the dynamics, the rules, and the purpose of play, but it can also be argued that this category falls under the definition of gameplay.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. provide an extensive overview of all the components and design choices that make up the aesthetics of videogames, but this does not give a complete view of the idea of an aesthetic experience that is used for the purposes of this thesis. Game aesthetics can also be broken down in another way. Simon Niedenthal gives us three core meanings of game aesthetics. The first is that of the sensory phenomena such as visuals, sound, story and interface. This meaning refers to a basic perception of videogames, and is basically what Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. discuss at length. The second meaning is that of any aspects of videogames that can be found in other art forms. This meaning takes the visuals, sound and story and compares it to the content and purpose of other art forms. For example, the graphics can be photo-realistic, as they often are, but they can also take on a different artistic visual style, such as when cel-shading is used, a notable example being *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. The third meaning is of game aesthetics in the emotional sense. This includes such nebulous concepts as fun, which is often associated with videogames but hardly theoretically well-developed. Though it is helpful to include this meaning, since reviewers will surely talk about whether they found something enjoyable or intellectually stimulating

(2009: 2). These meanings may seem broad, but they are enough to start looking for the aesthetic experience in videogame reviews. After all, it is not one particular aesthetic that is being searched for, but aesthetic experiences in general.

2.4 The Role of Critics

Videogames are most often produced by "AAA" developers and publishers. This indicates a mode of production with big budgets for a large audience in a highly competitive market. It resembles what Pierre Bourdieu calls the field of large-scale cultural production. It lies in opposition to the field of restricted production, where artists vie for legitimacy by defining criteria for evaluation of their products (1993: 115). According to Bourdieu, large-scale production produces middle-brow art, who's technical and aesthetic choices are determined by the public. Even goods targets at specific audiences have to appeal to the "highest social denominator." These modes of production operate on a spectrum and this creates a wide variety of cultural goods that deal with a dichotomy between searching for effect and pushing the art forward (125-128). Bourdieu argues that middle-brow art is characterized by using techniques that have worked in the past, yet it relies on the field of restricted production to supply innovation (129). Videogame production works in a somewhat different manner. A distinction can be made between independent and AAA developers, but videogames in the vein of art for art's sake are in a completely different realm when videogames in the common sense are discussed. Independent developers also have to worry about market success. The distinction is much more about budgets, the size of games, and accessibility for artists and consumers. Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network and Steam all provide a way for smaller games to reach the public. Thus smaller games live side by side with the bigger games, rather than provide a direct influence. There are also instances, such as the game *Braid* by Jonathan Blow, that are breakout successes despite being created with the focus on artistic values. And considering Tavinor's remark that games have reach a level of fidelity that removes the technical limits of creative expression, AAA games also have to deliver better and different kinds of narrative, gameplay and visual aesthetics to distinguish themselves from other products, rather than only focusing on what makes games fun. What this means for critics is that the difference between middle-brow art and high art fades quickly in favor of legitimizing and evaluating the games based on all that is available to consumers.

The contemporary notion of a critic is someone that informs the public of the value of cultural goods in a diverse market filled with options for different consumers. Critical discourse contains three elements. The descriptive or factual elements provide the public with

a way to familiarize themselves with the cultural good. The analytical aspect of reviews provides an interpretative context. And the most important parts of the review are the evaluative elements, where judgments are made about the merits of the work. Especially this last elements depends heavily on the trust between reader and critic, otherwise the judgments hold no weight (Debenedetti, 2006: 31). Though media critics are different from aestheticians in that they provide an economic function by focusing on the latest products, quality evaluations do require aesthetic theories (32). Reviews also reduce uncertainty for the public when buying into an experiential product and put certain products on the map so the public knows about them, though often the most expert consumers rely on them and use them as points of debate and discussion (34).

The debate about whether videogames can be art is not settled and there are only a few websites that have sprung up in recent years to discuss games on a more serious level, it is nonetheless useful to see videogame critics as members of an art world. Howard Becker describes in detail the way in which objects are determined to be art. Though this may not be the purpose of a videogame review, arriving at a measure of quality is certainly part of it, and that process shares similarities to the art worlds Becker describes. The people who determine what can be considered art are those that are generally seen by most to have some kind of entitled authority because of their experience or their position within the field. There is not always consensus on who possesses this authority or whether a certain opinion even matters (1982: 151-2). This is true for game reviews, which are not always accepted by members of the community, or heavily criticized for the basis on which the evaluation is made. The judgment on whether an object is art are based on a consensus of standards. Though there is a certain reliability in these standards, Becker claims that "this does not mean that there is any more to making something art than christening it" (155). For measures of quality in reviews there is an attempt made to justify the judgment based on specific criteria and conventions. However, as there is often a score attached to the review, there seems to be an emphasis on striving for objectivity. Of course creative goods cannot be evaluated so objectively, at least not on its artistic merits, since technical deficiencies can be more easily recognized. The objectivity is further tarnished because, as with evaluating art, the standards change. What these aestheticians bring to the table with their standards is the attempt to determine criteria and rules that legitimize art and artists and support innovation (162-3). Videogame reviews do clearly operate in this way, as derivative game designs are often unwelcome unless they provide some innovation or particular level of quality in other areas. The reviews will

certainly praise many high budget mainstream games, but there is also a lot of attention for well-made independent and otherwise artistic products.

In this way criticism, as pointed out by Henry Jenkins, is needed to ensure the survival of an art form. Market success is useful for a game studio, but it does not contain measures for improvement or innovation. The role that critics take must therefore be one that is passionate and use their position to speculate about the artistic potential of games. Game criticism presents an opportunity to point towards experimental and independent works that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. Jenkins laments the state of game criticism as it conservatively evaluates games based on existing ideas and conventions. He feels that thoughtful critics are capable of helping realize "the potential of reaching a broader public, of having a greater cultural impact, of generating more diverse and ethically responsible content" (2005: 190-2). Although Jenkins indicates that this type of criticism does not exist yet for videogames, review sites already in some ways strive to enable this potential by being ingrained in the videogame community and at the center of discussion. Cynthia Freeland offers even more viability for videogame reviews to be legitimate criticism because she believes that interpretations of art should be "reasoned, detailed, and plausible; they reflect background knowledge and community standards of rational debate" and this helps artists communicate and audience members to respond to art works better (2002: 175-6). This is a much more open way of looking at art criticism and videogame reviews definitely fit within this definition. They ultimately do serve to ensure the survival of videogames as cultural products.

2.5 Game Journalism and Reviews

Beginning in the 1980s, magazines have been around to specifically appeal to the videogame audience. Now this game journalism includes websites that are widely read by gamers and foster discussion on games and gamer identity. Game journalists are those "who are usually full-time, professionally involved in the dissemination of game-related news and analyses in magazines and newspapers, as well as blogs and news portals on the internet (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009: 1-2). Game journalism has not been an object of much study, and the effects of it on the industry and the way it is evaluated by the audience is still unclear (1). James Ivory finds that videogame reviews offer a comprehensive way to analyze the content of videogames, with the additional benefit of gaining insight into the opinions of reviewers about the content (2006: 106). His study relates mostly to gender representation in videogame reviews. This is a logical way to begin to set up a method for analyzing reviews because the

depiction of female characters in videogames has already been studied before. What is particular about reviews is that it seems to be the case so far is that it is a fairly male dominated field, regardless of the fact that the actual gaming public is much more diverse (Nieborg & Sihbonen, 2009: 1). The conclusion of Ivory's study is that the mostly male reviewers seem not to have much interest in the effect of sexualized portrayals of women in games and if reviewers were more critical, "videogame makers might be encouraged to depict female characters differently than they have in the past" (Ivory, 2006: 112). This suggests that reviewers could have some role in determining the design choices that developers make and cause awareness about societal issues. However, considering the fact that current game reviewers might be more journalist than critical aestheticians, it raises the question of whether reviews could have such influence at all.

Videogame reviews are featured on websites that also report on games and related products. They are therefore heavily depended on information and financial resources from the games industry itself. Game journalists possess a kind of social capital, which can be called game capital. They provide their audience with the latest insider information and recommend which games to play. Game journalists will often label themselves as game critics to separate themselves from notions of journalism in general (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009: 2). Stéphane Debenedetti makes this distinction for critics in cultural industries. There are aestheticians and media critics, or critic-journalists. The latter type is situated in the present and operates under deadlines to provide the public with an immediate evaluation of the cultural good. These critics have to be considered independent in order to remain trustworthy, though economic concerns have caused there to be some doubt about the authenticity of the review. Reviews can have an impact on the economic success of the product and therefore media critics play a vital role in a cultural industry, but there is also advertising displayed on the page and publishers will send free review copies out to critics early and give away promotional material. A conflict of interest arises from this between the game media and game publishers, because game journalists are so dependent on the games industry to provide game capital and access to information can be restricted while critique that is too harsh can endanger the financial relationship (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009: 5). The nature of cultural reviews is becoming more affected by the market and this causes reviews to be less evaluative and more informative, which is further aggravated by the fact that positive evaluations and high scores are used for promotional activity (Debenedetti, 2006: 32). Oftentimes the posting of screenshots and previews lead up to the eventual review and is essentially free promotion.

Videogame reviews are primarily written by these critic-journalists, though there are some exceptions cropping up in recent years such as the website *No High Scores,* which is set up by videogame critic-journalists, but aims to present their own personal opinion. Still, there is very little work being done by what may be called videogame aestheticians. More should be written by such people because the authenticity of videogame reviews is tarnished by such things as the inflation of review scores, making only the 8 to 10 range acceptable in the mind of the consumer. This is due to heavy consensus that is present between critics, caused by the sharing of similar beliefs and the established legitimacy that certain game companies receive from past works (Debenedetti, 2006: 34). Now game journalists are criticized for their lack of integrity, inconsistencies in their writing, and failure to contextualize, which is especially problematic since game reviews make up such a large part of the reporting (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009: 2). But Zagal, et al. examined the content of the reviews closely and actually found that design suggestions, the game in context with respect to other games and other media, and a variety of themes and topics were featured in these reviews. They concluded that these were more than just shopping guides, which counteracts some of the critique often levied against game journalism (Zagal et al., 2009: 221). To summarize, games journalism is inextricably linked to games criticism because of the prominence and importance of reviews. While games journalism tries to serve its audience and support communities and innovation, the fact that the games industry provides the information and financial backing creates a troubled relationship between games journalist, the industry and the audience.

2.6 Expectations

The conflicting views on whether reviews offer genuine critical assessment make it hard to form any preliminary conclusions. On the one had it could be said that reviews are merely part of a games journalism that is too heavily influenced by the financing and game capital provided by the games industry. On the other reviews provide a way to delve into the experiences and opinions of game players and look at the content of videogames. There is still much to be discovered about the field of games journalism and critical analysis of games.

This conflict manifests itself in more aspects that this thesis is trying to discover. It is expected that reviews will discuss the sensory experiences of games at length, and with a greater emphasis on description than aesthetic concerns. Although there does exist the possibility that some reviewers will want to distinguish themselves in their writing by being more opinionated. These could be outliers with much more aesthetic evaluation than the other reviews. This means that the assertion that more technical than aesthetics aspects will be

found in the reviews is still a good working assumption, the theory described here does allow room for there to a more nuanced picture. The jury is also still out on if game reviews provide enough context. If reviews have been too heavily influenced by the market and the integrity of the reviewer is at stake, the products could be evaluated too much on their own without the review making connections to the rest of the industry and other media. Yet Zagal, et al. found that two of the main themes they found in the content of game reviews were media context and game context.

There are some assessments that are difficult to be made here but are nonetheless of interest. The fact that games journalism is funded by the games industry could lead to reviews being skewed too positively, but the questions asked by this thesis do not offer a way to test this and the sampling method may not even help very much in this area . If this were tested, it could say something about whether critics have an unbiased opinion or if they are trying to avoid controversy and bad publicity for the developers that are funding them. It would also shed light on how reviews are used for promotional purposes. It also makes the idea that the more aesthetic elements there are, the more the review has the tendency to be legitimate art evaluation for purposes beyond being shopping guides, much less clear.

There is also the important inquiry into the effect of reviews on consumers. Studies have been done comparing critical success with commercial success, but for games with large budgets and heavy marketing, reviews may only serve as a predictor rather than causing the success. Though Nieborg and Sihvonen do point out that positive reviews may have a greater influence on smaller independent games (2009: 7).

All in all, the hypotheses that were initially set up have become more complex with the introduction of theory. Some sources undoubtedly confirm them, whereas others show that the opposite may be true. What this means is that the results are not so predictable and that whatever comes out of this thesis, it may not provide definitive answer either.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Introduction

Though the literature describes how videogames themselves can be analyzed, this research is interested in the discourse on videogames. In order to learn something about the role of critics in the videogame industry, an approach was taken that tried to capture the essential elements of this type of criticism. Videogame reviews are a reflection of the critic's ideas and views on a particular game. These reviews can be used to analyze the content of videogames, but this research is interested in answering questions about the writing itself. These reviews are by no means the only thing that critics write, though they do represent a gathering point for evaluation and discussion of the videogame in question. It is also much more consistent to categorize reviews than a host of blog editorials from a variety of sources, which can possibly contain more in-depth and critical commentary on videogames, but also relate to industry and societal issues, addressing themes beyond a particular game. Reviews are instantly recognizable, share many stylistic features, and drive a large amount of traffic to the websites. The websites have also made the reviews easily accessible by providing a separate header for them. There are some caveats to consider, however. Reviews are still evolving, and sometimes moving away from the format represented by the selection made here, which has been the standard for many years now. An example of this is Kotaku.com's simplified ratings system, which distills the verdict into a "yes", "no" or "not yet" on whether a consumer should buy the game (Totilo, 2012). For now, these methods do not serve to examine those issues, but rather focus on the existing format. The critics are most often game journalists working for a major videogame news website. This does not mean that the critics are necessarily heavily biased, since displaying commercial interests in their reviews reduces the trust of the reader, though a journalist will usually be assigned games in genres that they enjoy rather than ones outside of their preferences. Because of this there are a variety of journalists, so they cannot be categorized along with the websites and games to see if there are any patterns regarding their writing. Additionally, it is not clear what role the reviews serve in the purchasing process of the consumer, where they could either serve as validation of their purchase or as an instigator.

In this chapter, the research method of a qualitative textual analysis will be described as it applies to the coding of videogame reviews, and why this method was chosen. Then the details of choosing a sample will be laid out, followed by a list of the actual reviews that have been analyzed, and commentary on why they are an appropriate and generalizable selection. Finally, the operationalization of the theory towards useable codes and what these codes

stand for is described. This section is especially important, since particular criteria have been chosen to represent the codes, which may or may not be immediately obvious or intuitive.

3.2 Research Method

The approach to analyzing videogame reviews is pretty straightforward, even though it is somewhat unexplored territory. Selecting the method was born out of considering the major elements of videogames, some important concepts from art sociology, and set up through some necessary assumptions and simplifications. The latter of these considerations is due to the fact that game studies is a relatively young scientific field, and because this research aims to set up a possible framework, but by no means a definitive one. Frans Mäyrä offers some suggestions on how to study games, and of particular note are his comments on a methodology involving playing games, where he mentions professional critics. The takeaway is that different players all have varying playing styles, preferences, histories and games can serve different kinds of roles for people (2008: 166). This is why this research focuses on the way critics talk about games, rather than looking at user reviews or forum posts. Though critics may not always have a typical way of playing, this is taken into account by the fact that the questions this research asks are about how the games industry exists as a creative industry and as art world. This approach is not mentioned by Mäyrä, despite being thorough in dissecting different research methods. He does address qualitative research, but only to indicate how it addresses "experiences and meanings people attach to phenomena, and therefore it takes cultures and real-world contexts into account" (160). Since this research is looking to answer such questions about videogame critics, a qualitative method has been chosen.

The way the reviews have been analyzed is using directed qualitative analysis. It is directed because the concepts are derived from theory first and then sought in the content. The advantage of the method is that descriptive findings can be laid out that provide nuance to the subject and can be placed next to the theory. Of course, the theory on this subject is still thin, and the results are meant to help broaden the theory, if at all possible. A disadvantage is that there may be a bias towards supporting the theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1281-3). An attempt is made to code as objectively as possible according to the criteria, but there is no possibility for inter-coder reliability, making the results on the one hand more subjective, but on the other hand still well within what is necessary and adequate for qualitative analysis. The sample size is small and an attempt at statistical analysis would

prove fruitless. The general purpose of this research is to look for potential patterns or remarkable findings.

The reviews are placed copied from the websites and pasted into Microsoft Word documents, which can be read by the qualitative analysis program ATLAS.ti. Here the reviews are categorized based on the website and particular game. The codes to be used are then defined as well. The coding process involves selecting text and assigning a code to this piece of text, which can consist of an entire paragraph or a small part of a sentence. This is so that the percentage of text devoted to a certain code based on the word count can be determined. The code count therefore becomes meaningless, and is not considered in the calculations. Codes are applied based on the criteria and according to best judgment. The coding system can be applied to all parts of the text, because irrelevant text is a rare occurrence. The reviewer is not using the same criteria of aesthetic and technical elements, though there will no overlapping codes order for the percentage points to provide a meaningful picture.

The categories to be used for the codes will be detailed in the operationalization section, but of special note is the categorization of aesthetic and technical statements. Though these are further broken up into particular characteristics of videogames, this bisection is the defining feature of this research. The critics may not use this distinction themselves, so it is an explicit dichotomy constructed here. The reviewer, however, may be using this dichotomy implicitly. In the final analysis, the intent of the reviewer will be further explored besides the results.

3.3 Sample

A systematic approach has been taken to select reviews in a justifiable way. Some genres and types of games may lend themselves more to aesthetic or technical analysis, such as independent artistic games or simulation games respectively. Therefore games cannot be selected based on them already having an artistic status and thus may have reviews with more potential for containing aesthetic elements. This potential is taken into account for the selection process described below. Though it may be useful to analyze these games when discussing them as part of an art world, there is no clear guide on which games are more artistic than others. Many games mix artistic goals with technical systems, and awards are often based on genre rather than artistic qualities. For this research some assumptions and choices must be made to limit the scope yet still provide a generalizable result. This make the top rated games of 2011 good candidates. Because these games have already received critical

acclaim and are less likely to be bogged down by technical faults and limitations, reviews with a higher score will most likely contain more aesthetic elements than those with low scores. Low scoring games often fail on a technical level, such as when they contain bugs, glitches, or have unresponsive controls. It is possible that they received a low score because they failed on an aesthetic level, but generally any discussion relating to such things as narrative thematic incongruities or immersion breaking gameplay is reserved for the already reputable games. The content of reviews will limit this discussion to the games being merely "boring" or "frustrating." Focussing on reviews that only have a high score does leave out the full spectrum of games, though does not mean that it is not a representative sample of the medium.

First the websites from which the reviews were going to be analyzed had to be chosen. These would have to be the major players of videogame journalism, since those would be the most relevant for the most people. In order to obtain the most visited websites for videogames, the website *EbizMBA* was consulted. *EbizMBA* shows a ranking based on an aggregate of data, including the *Alexa* rankings for videogame websites. At the top is *Yahoo! Games*, but this site was not selected because it is more of a user-based search engine than a journalism and review site. Next on the list, with a the highest unique monthly visitors counts, are *IGN* and *Gamespot*. These two sites will be represented in the data because of their popularity, which indicates their opinions carry weight in the videogame community. By this is not meant that they are necessarily capable to influencing buying behavior, since additional marketing still plays a much larger role in this in most cases, but it does mean these websites form a central hub for community discussion around games. The next four sites on this list are dismissed because they either do not possess the format of a journalistic review site or their organization and review and rating structure is not comparable to that of the two major websites. The next available website, with around 3 million unique monthly visitors is *GamesRadar*. This site was selected because it has a 0-10 rating system, comparable to *IGN* and *Gamespot*, but is much smaller than the other two sites. Additional sites do not need to be considered, since *GamesRadar* does represent the sites in the bracket of 1,5 to 4 million unique monthly visitors closely enough. These sites focus on different stories, have various unique features, and their own editorial staff that may not agree with or provide a different perspective than the major websites. For the purposes of this thesis, *IGN* will be considered the most commercial website, due to the fact that it covers more topics besides games, such as films and comics, and features far more links to top articles and games than the other websites. *GamesRadar* will be considered the least commercial, since it

is the smallest, though still has some advertising featured on the site. *Gamespot* falls in the middle because it has less advertising, but is a larger site than *GamesRadar*.

Having chosen which websites to use, the reviews were then selected using the top ten of 2011 games featured on *Metacritic*. This is because each website has a different way of expressing their top 10 preferences. The way these preferences are shown can either be done for a site as a whole, such as end of the year awards, or by specific categories, such as the preferences per editor, the top 10 per genre or per platform, or simply by looking at all the reviews arranged by score. Though the formula used by *Metacritic* to determine the review score averages is disputable, since they convert five-star ratings and letter grades into a score out of one hundres, it does manage to create a list that shows games which are universally critically acclaimed, which is as any aggregate review website works, such as *Rotten Tomatoes* for film. For the purposes of this research, which is to use a comparable list for the three sites, this is suitable, though the list provided by *Metacritic* had to be streamlined. The games that are excluded include the following. There are duplicate entries in the list because of multi-platform releases, though these reviews are composed of the same text by the same reviewer. Since the selection of games is from 2011, games from earlier years that are ported to or re-released on different platforms are also removed. Much of the review would discuss the differences and changes rather than the game itself. Games that are also excluded are a number of mobile phone games, since these do not always get an official review on each of the three websites. This is why the platforms are limited to Xbox 360, Playstation 3, PC and Nintendo Wii. It must be noted that the review from a particular website may not always be featured on *Metacritic*, which is most often the case with *Gamesradar*, so the list is used to select the games, but the reviews are sought on the particular review websites that have been chosen. In summary, for each game in the top 10 from 2011 on *Metacritic,* there will be three reviews, one from each website, which includes *IGN, Gamespot* and *GamesRadar*, totaling 30 reviews, that will used for qualitative textual analysis.

Unfortunately, in order to remain consistent, the mobile phone games were excluded because they are not consistently reviewed on each website, even though these also receive critical acclaim and commercial success. Although as it turns out, the selection of games ends up addressing a broad spectrum of genres and covers each of the four platforms mentioned above in roughly equal measure. The selection contains the genres action, adventure, role-playing game, shooter, platformer, racing and other genres. While this is by no means a representation of all the genres and types of games that exist, it is a representative sample of most games produced on big budgets. This is an advantage because it means that analyzing

more reviews using the same selection method as described above would likely yield only marginally different results, unless of course the sample size was greatly expanded. The selection does not include all of the most critically acclaimed titles of 2011, but the variety on display should be sufficient, though it must be said that these titles have also all been commercially successful.

3.4 Selection of Reviews

Using the criteria for elimination, the completed list of selected games is shown and described in table 3.1 below. The games in the list represent the final selection of reviews that will be analyzed for this thesis. Though the only important distinctions being made are the name of the videogame and the website, additional information has been provided to give a clear overview of the research units. The genre and other facts of each game are present in this table, although these are not points of focus of this analysis. A reviewer may approach a review from any perspective regardless of genre. The platform that occurs in this table is the one that was reviewed, though most of these games are available on other platforms as well. The word "exclusive" is added in brackets when the game is only featured on one platform. The word count is also included, since the percentage of words for each code will be derived from this number. It also gives a better idea of the size of these texts. The score of the review is placed in the table, but only because these reviews were selected based on the aggregate score. They will not receive further analysis. As this table shows, there is a large amount of variety under each header. There are only a few critics that have two or three reviews to their name, and the word count varies wildly. This amount of variance is advantageous because the data will be more representative of reviews in general.

Table 3.1 – List of reviews

Name	Description		#	Website	Reviewer	Score	Word Count
Batman: Arkham City	**Genre**	Action	1	**IGN**	Greg Miller	9.5	1278
	Developer	Rocksteady Studios	2	**Gamespot**	Carolyn Petit	9.0	2680
	Platform	PlayStation 3	3	**GamesRadar**	Charlie Barratt	10	1880
	Release Date EU	October 21, 2011					
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	**Genre**	Role-Playing Game	4	**IGN**	Charles Onyett	9.5	3280
	Developer	Bethesda Game Studios	5	**Gamespot**	Kevin VanOrd	9.0	2477
	Platform	Xbox 360	6	**GamesRadar**	Matthew Keast	10	2974
	Release Date EU	November 11, 2011					
Portal 2	**Genre**	First-Person Shooter/ Platformer	7	**IGN**	Charles Onyett	9.5	1463
	Developer	Valve	8	**Gamespot**	Chris Watters	9.0	1650
	Platform	PC	9	**GamesRadar**	Tyler Wilde	10	2132
	Release Date EU	April 19, 2011					
Minecraft	**Genre**	First-Person Action/ Creative	10	**IGN**	Anthony Gallegos	9.0	1637
	Developer	Mojang	11	**Gamespot**	Nathan Meunier	8.5	1340
	Platform	PC	12	**GamesRadar**	Josh Miller-Watt	9	1197
	Release Date EU	November 18, 2011					
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword	**Genre**	Action Adventure	13	**IGN**	Richard George	10	2041
	Developer	Nintendo	14	**Gamespot**	Tom Mc Shea	7.5	2173
	Platform	Nintendo Wii (Exclusive)	15	**GamesRadar**	Carolyn Gudmundson	9	1547
	Release Date EU	November 18, 2011					
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	**Genre**	Third-Person Action Adventure	16	**IGN**	Greg Miller	10	1389
	Developer	Naughty Dog Software	17	**Gamespot**	Tom Mc Shea	9.0	2433
	Platform	PlayStation 3 (Exclusive)	18	**GamesRadar**	Mikel Reparaz	9	2050
	Release Date EU	November 2, 2011					
Rayman Origins	**Genre**	Platformer	19	**IGN**	Brian Altano	9.5	995
	Developer	Ubisoft	20	**Gamespot**	Shaun McInnis	8.5	890
	Platform	Nintendo Wii	21	**GamesRadar**	Gary Steinman	9	1048
	Release Date EU	November 25, 2011					

	LittleBigPlanet 2	Genre	Platformer/Creative	22	**IGN**	Greg Miller	9.0	1981
		Developer	Media Molecule	23	**Gamespot**	Justin Calvert	9.0	1859
		Platform	PlayStation 3 (Exclusive)	24	**GamesRadar**	Mikel Reparaz	10	1645
		Release Date EU	January 21, 2011					
	Forza Motorsport 4	Genre	Racing/Simulation	25	**IGN**	Luke Reilly	9.5	2777
		Developer	Turn 10 Studios	26	**Gamespot**	Justin Calvert	8.5	2375
		Platform	Xbox 360 (Exclusive)	27	**GamesRadar**	Michael Grimm	9	2250
		Release Date EU	October 14, 2011					
	Gears of War 3	Genre	Third-Person Shooter	28	**IGN**	Casey Lynch	9.0	1747
		Developer	Epic Games	29	**Gamespot**	Chris Watters	9.5	2034
		Platform	Xbox 360 (Exclusive)	30	**GamesRadar**	Charlie Barratt	9	1870
		Release Date EU	September 20, 2011					

3.5 Operationalization

Having made a selection of reviews to analyze, it is now important to describe how these are going to be analyzed. Qualitative textual analysis can be done with the help of the program ATLAS.ti, which allows for easy highlighting of text and assigning codes. These codes are meant to be fairly intuitive for anyone closely familiar with reading reviews, but for the layperson, who is perhaps more familiar with book or film reviews, there are some significant differences. However, first the basic tenets of the research question should be addressed. The research question is centered on the concepts of aesthetic and technical elements of videogame reviews. Though describing statements as aesthetic may be fairly obvious as it relates to any kind of experience, feeling, or opinion, describing statements as technical may be less so. In order to help increase understanding of these concepts, the research of Zagal, Ladd and Johnson will provide some necessary descriptors. Their research objective was to categorize game reviews and find what types of content is present, and what distinguishes them from mere "shopping guides" (2009: 215). The research here tries to take this a step further by seeing whether the game reviews also constitute game criticism that marks videogames as cultural and art products and incorporate the aesthetic aspects of videogames, narrative, visuals, sound, gameplay and value, which are particularly and separately labeled in videogame reviews. The approach is also the reverse of Zagal, et al., because whereas they used open coding to arrive at a smaller set of specific themes, this research determines the codes first and then labels the reviews. Zagal, et al. use an inductive approach to determine

the content of videogame reviews, whereas this thesis uses a deductive approach, in order to see what purpose videogame reviews serve. Thus, some of the themes Zagal, et al. use will overlap, be separated and combined with the codes used here. Below is the table of themes as found and described by Zagal, et al. (2009: 221).

Table 3.2 – Themes found by Zagal, Ladd & Johnson

Theme	Description
Description	What you need to do to play this game as well as its features, modes, and characteristics.
Personal Experience	Emotions felt due to the game (during or after play). Also includes technical problems experienced.
Reader Advice	Recommendations, strategies for success and enjoyment of game as well as discussion of the skills or abilities necessary to play this game.
Suggestions for Improvement	Discussion of features that are missing or lacking or suggestions for future improvement of game.
Media Context	Contextualization of game with respect to non-game media properties from film, books, TV shows, comic books, and so on.
Game Context	Contextualization of the game with respect to other games, game genres and their conventions as well as the history of games in general.
Technology	Affordances and role of hardware on which game runs. Includes discussion of the controllers used or other capabilities.
Design Hypothesis	Design Goals that developers/designers had for the game.
Industry	Discussion of state, issues, or trends of the games industry as a whole.

Given this table of themes, the concepts of aesthetic and technical statements can be made clear.

Aesthetic statements for this research will be any that incorporate emotional personal experience, the enjoyment of the game, and design choices noted by the reviewer. Generally aesthetic statements include an opinion on whatever element they describe and lean towards artistic sensibilities. They are an evaluation of the sensory phenomena as described by Niedenthal and the explanation of the cognitive process involved in how the reviewer arrived at remarks about the quality of the game, the way in which Park describes the process of the

aesthetic experience. It should be noted that it is not important whether these statements are positive or negative, simply that they express the feelings a reviewer has. After all, the question is how much aesthetic discussion exists in a review, not what kind.

Technical statements can be approached in two different ways. The first is any statement relating to how the game operates on a computational level, such as technical problems and hardware and control capabilities. The second is that it they serve as non-aesthetic statements, which are essentially only descriptive. Because of the table provided by Zagal, et al., another code is added. This will be context, which combines the descriptions of Media Context, Game Context and Industry together. These statements can be descriptive, but they show a connection with the rest of the creative industry, and the more of these are present, the more it shows that videogames are discussed and embedded within a cultural world. Essentially these statements follow an approach similar to Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. where the description of the aesthetic elements is presented without evaluation. The Diverse Worlds Project is also taken into account, which breaks up the content in videogames into four categories. The first is the physical world, which basically means the setting or settings where the game takes place and all its visual characteristic. The second is the characters, how they are depicted and their speaking functions. The third is style, which includes a number of technical aspects such as level of realism, aspect ratio, camera positioning, lighting and the use of cinematic sequences. Finally there is narrative, which looks at the story that is being told by the game, the influence the player has, genre and theme, and the amount of violence depicted (Brand, et al., 2003: 6-13).

For each of the characteristics of videogames derived from previous research and the traditional format of game reviews, an aesthetic and technical distinction is made. These characteristics are also fairly self-explanatory, though perhaps also not familiar to the layperson, since film or books do not contain gameplay, and story is often integral to the experience, whereas with videogames this is an optional element. The descriptions of each of the following codes have been used as criteria for labeling the text.

Narrative	
Aesthetic	This code is used when the reviewer talks about their personal experience with the story and their opinion of it. This is not merely a description of the story, but the impact and emotions that the reviewer felt and how the player might feel. Narrative aesthetic also refers to any remarks made about what the characters in the story are like and how they fit within in. The narrative may also be referred to when talking about the quality of the writing.
Technical	This code is applied when story aspects are laid out in a descriptive manner. Either the story is simply explained without concerns for quality or opinion, or aspects such as presentation, quality and substance are addressed. This type of narrative can refer to how much story is actually present in the game, as there can be more or less of it. In addition, this code is also used for the description of certain quests, unless they involve a discussion or description of gameplay elements.

Visuals	
Aesthetic	This code refers to statements about the art direction, style, uniqueness, and impressions that the visuals of a game possess. This includes comparisons to other art styles and games, how detailed the environments are, and whether the visual style is consistent with the rest of the game. Visuals includes anywhere from textures to cinematics.
Technical	This code is used for statements regarding anything related to graphics and technical capabilities, such character animations, particle effects, draw distance, and the like. Remarks about presentation, menu design, different modes of view and camera capabilities, and even load times are considered as well. This further includes graphical glitches and the consistency of framerates.

Sound	
Aesthetic	This code is applied for personal feelings about the sound and how they enhance the experience of the game. This includes sound effects that may be evocative or lack fervor and whether they change based on the action on the screen, a soundtrack that may memorable, and the quality of the voice acting.
Technical	This code is about descriptions of the technical qualities, implementation and the amount of content of sound effects, voice-overs, environmental sounds and the soundtrack. In addition, this includes what the best equipment to use will be, such as headphones and a microphone. The code is also used when the use of sound forms an element of gameplay.

Gameplay	
Aesthetic	This code deals with the personal experience of gameplay. Generally it is about how certain actions feel, and whether they are entertaining, thrilling, satisfying or unique. This can include the sense of discovery from exploring the game and its environment and features, and how the game's action is paced and designed. It is also about the quality of the controls, such as if they are responsive, feel natural or connect with the action on screen. Additionally, when gameplay is talked about in relation to other features and if it fits within the considered purpose of the game as viewed by the reviewer, it is also included in this code.
Technical	This code is in large part for the description of gameplay that can be experienced in the game, which is often necessary to make other parts of the review more clear. This includes the different modes of play, customization options and gameplay mechanics and systems, such as how to level up a character or different approaches to combat. This code also describes the control options and capabilities and difficulty level.

Value	
Aesthetic	This code is about how the reviewer feels the total package the game offers comes together and how each element fits is thematically consistent with the goals of the design. It is also about where the game stands in relation to other games and whether it pushes the medium forward. When this code is used in relation to content, the reviewer is giving an opinion on how entertaining and engaging the game is as a whole, whether it is worth the price, and whether it has a lasting impact and reason to replay the game.
Technical	This code addresses the content of the game, which includes how long the single-player portion of the game will take to complete, whether replaying the game holds additional benefits and the amount of multi-player modes and features. Value technical includes the description of levels and events, the size and purpose of the environments that can be explored, and unlockable content.

Context
This code is a combination of media context and game context. It is applied when statements are made about how the game in the review relates to other games, game genres, and the games industry in general, and the history of development, hype and previous games in the series or by the same developer.
The context code is also used when the games or elements of the games are compared to non-game media properties from film, books, TV shows, comic books and music.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction

This thesis has set out to determine the degree of aesthetic evaluation that videogame reviews possess. A distinction was made between aesthetic elements, which are evaluative, and technical elements, which are descriptive. These were then coded for based on five different aspects of videogames. There was also a code for context, which was meant to see if reviews spend enough time linking the product to other games and media. Here the findings of this research will be shown. First an overall picture of the amount of aesthetic and technical elements will be shown, and this will be done per review site. Then the breakdown of codes for each of the five aspects and context will be presented per game review with remarks about noticeable features of the data. Some additional remarks about the coding process and findings that are not reflected in the data will be discussed. Finally, the data will be placed next to the hypotheses that were established in chapter 1 to see if there is any correspondence.

4.2 Findings

In this section the graphical representation of the data will be shown. Each of the bars in charts 4.1 through 4.10 represent the percentage of words that is dedicated to a particular code. This percentage is taken from the word count that is listed in Table 3.1. in the previous chapter. The bars should therefore not be compared across charts, but only relative to one another. The percentage is calculated per the amount of words present in each review. Only the overall results provide useful comparison between codes, though each chart has been scaled to show up to 50 percent on the y-axis to make them proportionate to one another. This also makes it somewhat easier to read. The standard error is also indicated. This is the standard deviation divided by the amount of reviews. Though there is a lot of variance, the standard error shows that these results are useable and the averages would not change significantly by analyzing more reviews. For clarity's sake, it should be noted that the order of the codes has been placed into alphabetical order by ATLAS.ti, which is different from the order maintained in this thesis. The order is inconsequential, however.

The overall results are meant to answer the main questions posed by this thesis and give insight into whether the hypotheses are proven or not. These are about the amount of aesthetic elements present, but also about whether certain review sites are more prone to technical description rather than evaluation. For each of the codes, an example will be provided to give a better understanding of the way in which the text is written. Of course one example does not describe the range of different possibilities that are available, but these will

be some of the more clear-cut examples. Though there are instances that had to be decided upon because they either, did not always fit neatly into the description of the code, or multiple codes could possibly be applied. The results of the specific codes are meant to add nuance to the findings and to see if any extra conclusions can be drawn. The code for context will be given its own analysis, since it cannot be divided into aesthetic and technical components, and is only meant to show the sheer amount present in each review. After all, statements coded for context can also have another one of the ten codes applied to them. Some text only pertained to context, but often times the elements of gameplay, narrative, sound, visuals and value were discussed in a contextual frame.

Overall

Each code received varying degrees of attention, though they were all able to be used. The text was always able to fit within at least one of the codes. The breakdown of each code, with the aesthetic code in blue and the technical code in red, can be seen below in chart 4.1.

Chart 4.1 – Total percentages of words per code for all reviews (Total N = 57092)
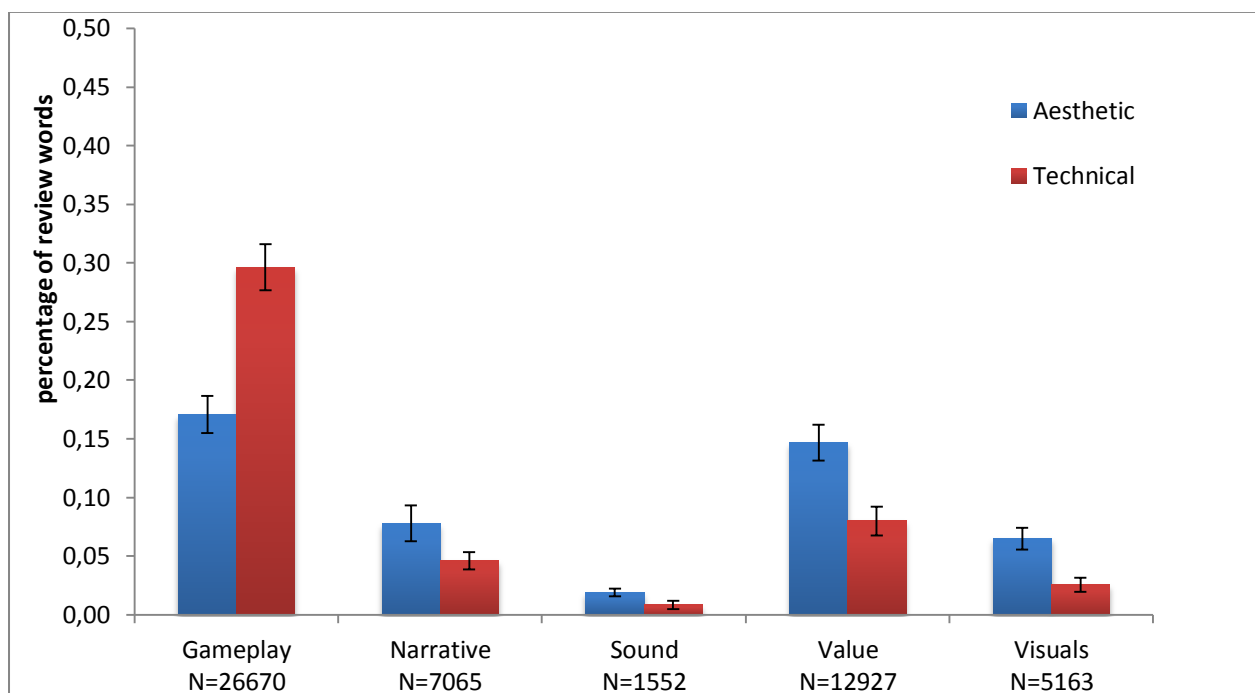

These are the results for when the total amount of words for each code is divided by the grand total of all words in the thirty reviews. The largest share of the content deals with gameplay. 17 percent of gameplay is comprised of aesthetic statements, and 30 percent is comprised of technical statements. The technical share is almost twice as much as the aesthetic one,

indicating that reviews are in large part simply describing what a player can do in the game. When looking at the other codes, however, the amount of aesthetic elements almost doubly outweighs technical elements. The second largest share is value, and this is 15 percent aesthetic, 8 percent technical. This shows that the overall judgments on the game more often contain expressions of feelings about how worthwhile the content is rather than only describing the amount of modes, levels, unlockables, and etcetera. Next is narrative, with 8 percent aesthetic and 5 percent technical elements. The story of the game is not only explained, but in most cases, the writer of the review also has an opinion on it or was moved in a particular way. The fourth largest share is visuals, with 6 percent aesthetic and 3 percent technical elements. Gamers are often seen as just caring about how the graphics look, but apparently not only do reviews spend significantly less time on the matter than on gameplay and narrative, when they do it is about appreciating the style of the visuals rather than graphical fidelity and capability. Finally, the smallest share is that of sound, with only 2 percent aesthetic and 1 percent technical elements. It could be said that if the sound design is good, it should be noticed less, but this code included voice acting, which is present in most AAA games, the soundtrack and sound effects, which can have an impact on how the gameplay feels. Yet sound is mentioned so infrequently that it seems most reviewers do not mention it unless it is of particular significance.

There are three important things to take away from this chart. There is about an equal amount of attention given to aesthetic statements as technical ones, because the former makes up 48 percent and the latter 46 percent. Gameplay makes up, on average, the largest amount of the review. And though gameplay statements are more technical than aesthetic, all the other aspects of the game are discussed in a more aesthetic than technical way.

Chart 4.2-4 – Total percentage of words per code per website.

IGN   Gamespot   GamesRadar
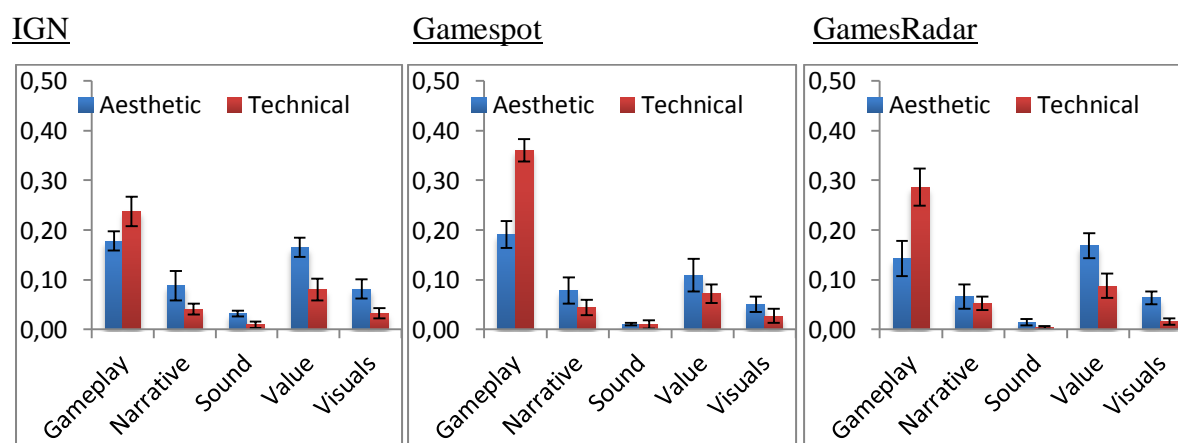
Looking at the individual websites, the patterns that appear for each website are very similar to the overall results. Gameplay makes up the largest share, and the proportion of aesthetic versus technical elements is roughly divided the same way. This further establishes that the pattern of the overall results is a good indicator of the content of the thirty reviews. There are some slight differences in how closely the patterns match up to the overall results. The reviews from *GamesRadar* match closely with 46 percent aesthetic elements and 45 percent technical elements. The *IGN* reviews have more aesthetic elements, which make up 54 percent, and the technical elements make up 40 percent. *Gamespot* diverges the other way and actually has more technical elements. The ratio here is 44 percent versus 51 percent.

Narrative

The story of a game can be an important part of the experience, but in many cases it is only meant to provide some context for the gameplay, or it is not necessary at all. For a number of games here, story is a vital component, especially since they are sequels as part of a franchise. The codes for narrative were therefore frequently applied to instances where the story of the prior game is detailed and how the current story matches up to what is established before. In chart 4.5 the amount of words spent on narrative can be seen per review.

An example of Narrative Aesthetic:

> *Most love the banter between Drake and Sully, the love affair between Elena and Drake or the one-liners Drake shouts to himself as the game goes on. Naughty Dog created a universe here that players feel connected with, but, again, the developers toy with that. They insert things that take the mentor/pupil relationship to another level. They flesh out backstories, they break bonds, and they make us face the characters' worst fears. And, no, those fears aren't clowns. (IGN, Uncharted 3)*

An example of Narrative Technical:

> *If you have this content loaded onto your console, the story will occasionally switch to Catwoman. The paths of the two characters occasionally intersect, and if you have the Catwoman content, her occasional interludes offer some illumination on how she gets into the situations in which you encounter her as Batman. (Gamespot, Batman: Arkham City)*

Chart 4.5 – Percentage of words for Narrative Aesthetic and Narrative Technical per review
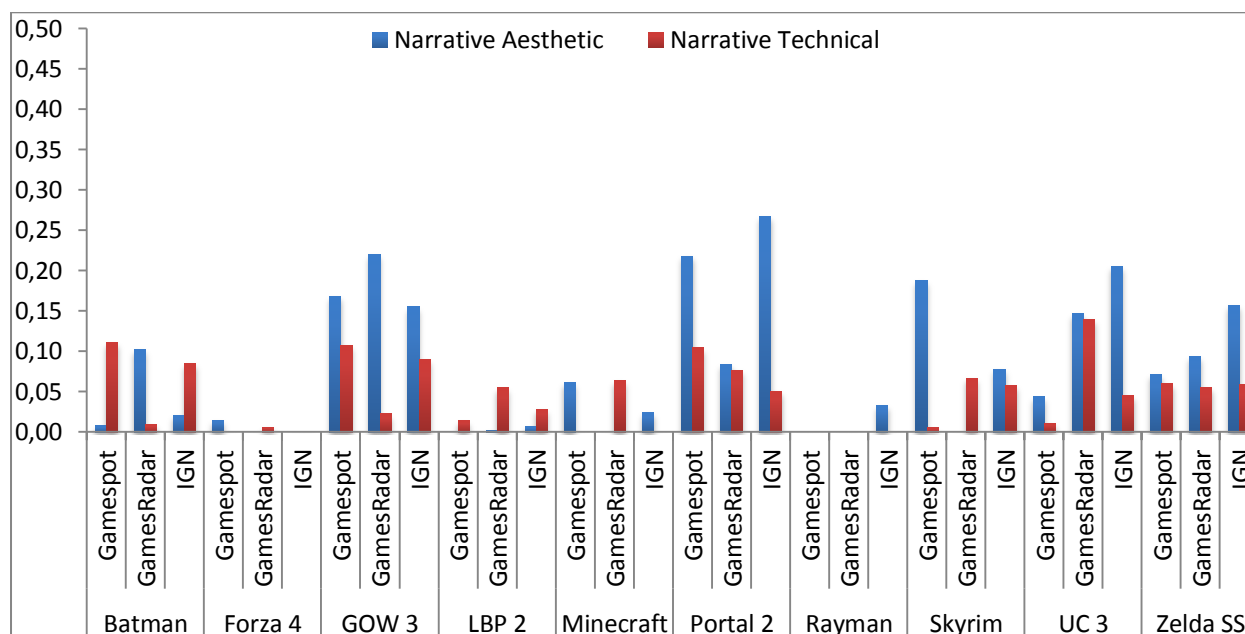
The amount of words dedicated to narrative depended on both the type of game and direction the critic took with the review. *Portal 2* and *Gears of War 3* receive lots of attention for their narrative, more so than the racing game *Forza 4*, which only had some details and history of the cars that qualified as narrative. *Rayman* and *Minecraft* are good examples of a games that only have a small amount of story and focus mainly on the gameplay. Games like *Batman* and *Uncharted 3*, where the story makes up a large part of the experience, receive a wide range of narrative attention, both in total amount and the ratio of aesthetic versus technical.

Visuals

The artistic design of a game is most apparent in how it looks, which is not just about the features of the graphics and the level of photo-realism, but also the visual influences and direction the art takes. The difference between aesthetic and technical statements about visuals is fairly clear. On the one hand the aesthetic statements are often about the art of the visuals and technical statements about the graphical glitches. On the other hand this does not always have to be the case, since aesthetic judgments are also made about the lighting, particle effects and textures.

An example of Visuals Aesthetic:

> *Rayman Origins is a living, breathing testament to the artistic capabilities of a 2D canvas. Every one of the game's numerous landscapes is filled with rich, hand-drawn detail, from the lush foliage of Jibberish Jungle to the flurrying snowfalls of Mystical Pique. There's an almost eccentric level of variety on display here. One moment, you swim through a haunting underwater abyss; the next, you leap across an industrial cooking pot full of molten lava in some hellacious version of a Mexican restaurant kitchen. Whether it's your own character or the many different enemies you encounter, the 2D animations are wonderfully fluid and impress a strong kinetic energy onto every last bit of movement. (Gamespot, Rayman Origins)*

An example of Visuals Technical:

> *A dragon skeleton might disappear and then later drop out of the sky in a new location. A dragon could get stuck in place, flailing about in the geometry in a mess of wings and tail. For that matter, you could get stuck in the environment, maybe just by walking into a corner, which forces you to either quick-travel to a different location (if you're lucky enough to be outdoors) or load a save game. Frame rate drops are uncommon, but you might encounter a few severe ones, and Xbox 360 system crashes might occur. (Gamespot, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim)*

Chart 4.6 – Percentage of words for Visuals Aesthetic and Visuals Technical per review
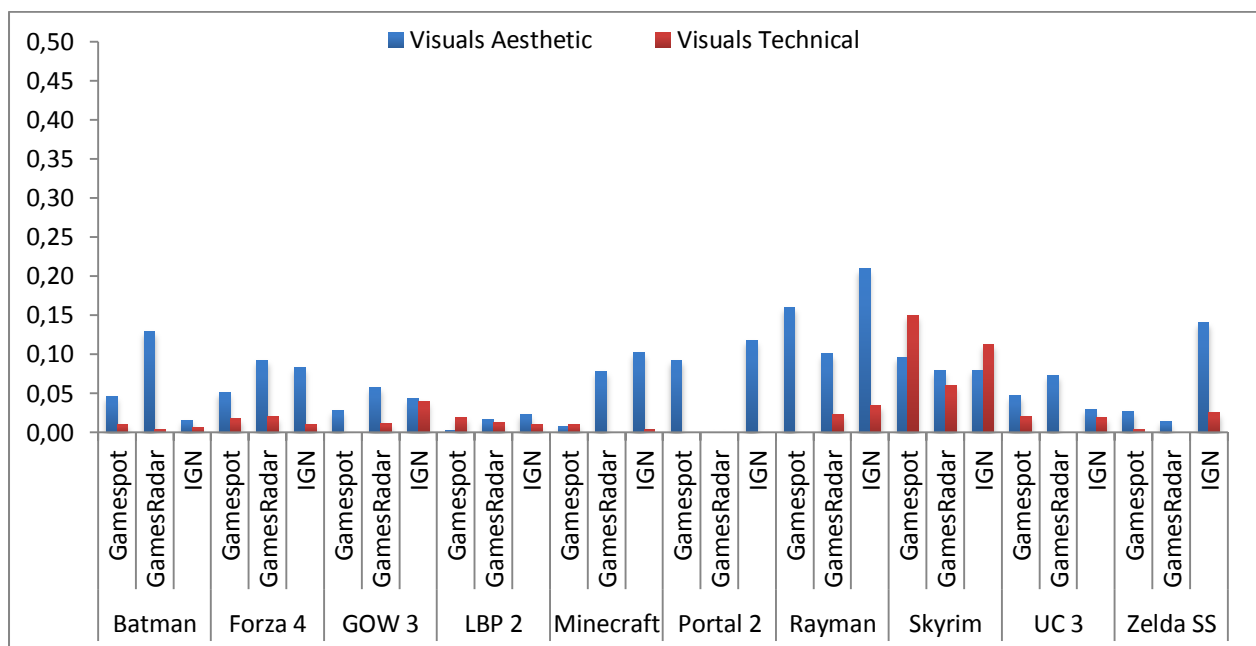
There is also a lot of variation present for visuals, though there are two notable standouts. *Rayman* has an overall higher rate of aesthetic statements than the other games and *Skyrim* has a noticeably higher rate of technical statements. *Rayman Origins* is a 2-dimensional game that has a unique cartoony visual style, explaining the need for the review to focus on the aesthetics of the visuals. *Skyrim*, on the other hand, suffers from a number of visual glitches and technical issues. For the discussion of visuals in a game, it seems that the type of game is more important than the direction the reviewer chooses to take. There are some minor exceptions for particular games, such as *GamesRadar* not mentioning the visuals of *Portal 2* and the *IGN* review of *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* focusing more on visuals than the other websites.

Sound

Statements about sound were very scarce. Though the music, sound effects and voice acting are a major part of the production of a videogame and require sometimes just as much development time as other aspects, the reviews only describe sound in a very general sense or when it makes up a particular part of the gameplay. Instances where specific elements of the sound in a game are discussed are rare and often brief.

An example of Sound Aesthetic:

> *Still, Forza 4 doesn't just look and feel better, it sounds better too. Turn the music down and the volume up, up until you can only communicate with other people in the same room by shouting - or perhaps blinking in Morse code. That's the sweet spot. The older cars sound the best. The howl of a D-Type Jag will rattle your nipples off, and if the snarl of a 351 Cleveland V8 in Forza 4 can't bring Steve McQueen back from the dead nothing can. (IGN, Forza Motorsport 4)*

An example of Sound Technical:

> *Music has always been an important element of the Zelda series, increasingly so when Ocarina of Time tied gameplay and sound together over a decade ago. Skyward Sword represents a shift in that dynamic, confining the involvement of music and instruments largely to optional tasks or the plot itself. Don't expect acquiring the harp to significantly change how you'll play the game. Songs are generally discovered and played once as Link continues his adventure. Beyond that, expect to only play strings when Link needs a bit of extra health or wants a hint from a Gossip Stone. (IGN, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword)*

Chart 4.7 – Percentage of words for Sound Aesthetic and Sound Technical per review
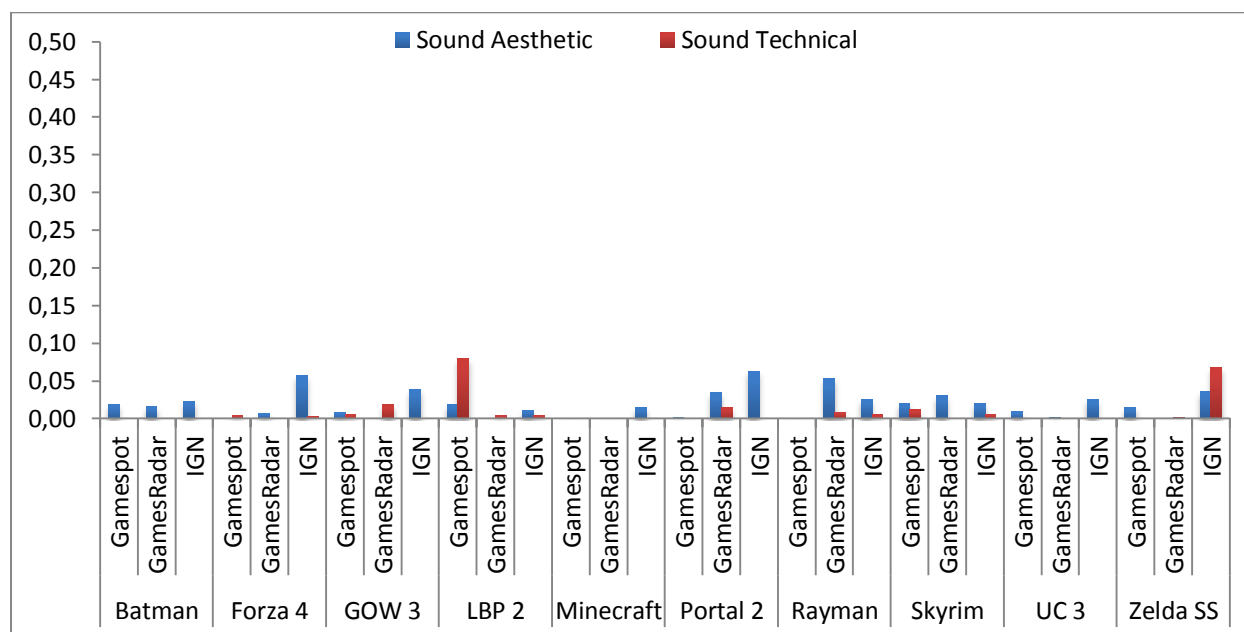
Since a lot of sound related statements are so general, a word could be said about some of the higher percentages. These statements mostly deal with how the sound impacts the gameplay, like the above technical example, though it is also seen in the review of *Rayman* by *GamesRadar*. The highest percentage shown here is present in the *LittleBigPlanet 2* review by *Gamespot*, which is made up of statement that describes the sound editing possibilities that the game offers. Thus sound is only considered important when it impacts the gameplay, and a really stellar voice acting performance or a particularly good soundtrack are required for sound related statements to be present.

Gameplay

Statements about gameplay are featured most prominently in the reviews by a large margin. They are often descriptive, meaning that the reviewer simply mentions the possible actions the game offers, though the gameplay features can be expansive. Deciding between whether statements were aesthetic or technical was not an easy task, because technical statements still specifically characterize certain types of actions and content, and delineating what is and is not included is also a form of evaluation. Aesthetic statements often deal with how the gameplay feels and what design decisions contribute to fun and satisfying gameplay. Comparisons between other genres and gameplay types are also fairly frequent.

An example of Gameplay Aesthetic:

> *Simple enough, sure, but the way the devs incorporate the latest gameplay hazards is just astounding, constantly layering in new baddies along with new environmental and jumping puzzles. These were among the most difficult bits in the game, but they elicited an intensely satisfying feeling of accomplishment whenever we nailed a nigh-impossible room after a few dozen gut-wrenching tries (never mind the profuse cursing and ill-advised attempts to twist our controller like a dishrag). (GamesRadar, Rayman Origins)*

An example of Gameplay Technical:

> *Now, you need to dip into your bag of tools to figure out the best way to advance. You may need to use your beetle to scout the environment or roll a bomb into a hole, and the unpredictability of the obstacles forces you to carefully consider each scenario. Though you rarely die in combat, there are more than a few situations where you might find yourself stumped. You can solicit advice from Fi, the companion who travels with you, and this advice is usually vague enough to point you in the right direction without spelling out exactly what needs to be done. (Gamespot, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword)*

Chart 4.8 – Percentage of words for Gameplay Aesthetic and Gameplay Technical per review
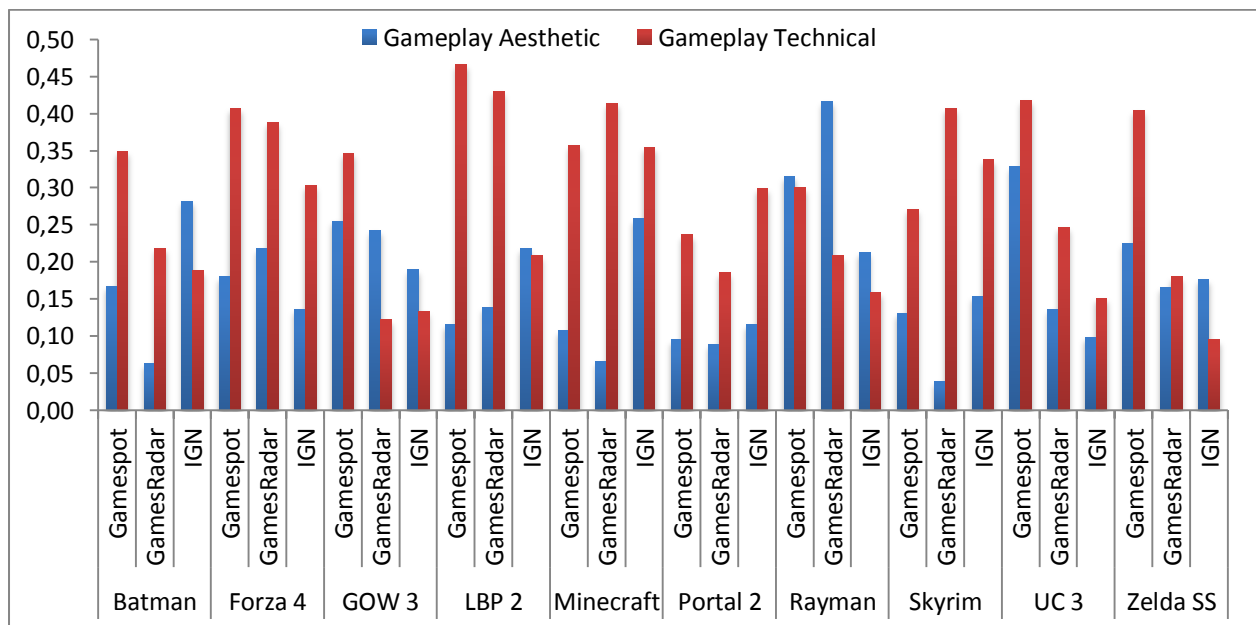
The most notable pattern that can be seen from chart 4.8 is what was already discerned from the overall results, namely that the technical statements about gameplay generally outweigh the aesthetic ones. Here it can be seen that this is true across the board, rather than having

some reviews be more aesthetic and others be more technical, the way in which the other codes manifest themselves. There are a few exceptions, but the amount of attention to technical gameplay statements is often double or more than double that of aesthetic gameplay statements. When looking at these ratios, it seems that there are a couple of games that have a similar balance for each of the three reviews. This can be seen with *Forza Motorsport 4*, *Portal 2*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*. Once again, there is roughly an equal balance between the type of game that is being reviewed and the approach of the reviewer.

Value

After gameplay, statements about value make up the largest part of the reviews. These statements are about the game in its entirety. Though the other elements are sometimes evaluated alongside each other, value is also about the modes of play, replay ability, the overall experience and any issues that are prevalent throughout the game. Most of the time value statements are about the content, and these can be both aesthetic and technical, depending on the approach of the reviewer. Just like gameplay, the line between aesthetic and technical statements can be somewhat blurry, because a description of the amount of content can serve a similar purpose to an evaluative statement.

An example of Value Aesthetic:

> *Gears of War 3 boasts the best co-op and multiplayer of the series, by far, easily making up for the less-than-satisfying campaign. The end of the trilogy may not live up to your epic expectations, but somewhere in the tenth - or hundredth - hour of Beast and Horde 2.0 modes, you'll forgive it. (GamesRadar, Gears of War 3)*

An example of Value Technical:

> *If you have no interest in creating a single level, there are 30 story levels and some challenges to play through, more than 3.5 million user-created levels from the original LBP that you can access with the new game, and a slew of levels people are about to create will soon be ready to try out. If you don't want to platform and only want to tinker, you can jump into Create mode and have at it without touching the story. (IGN, LittleBigPlanet 2)*

Chart 4.9 – Percentage of words for Value Aesthetic and Value Technical per review
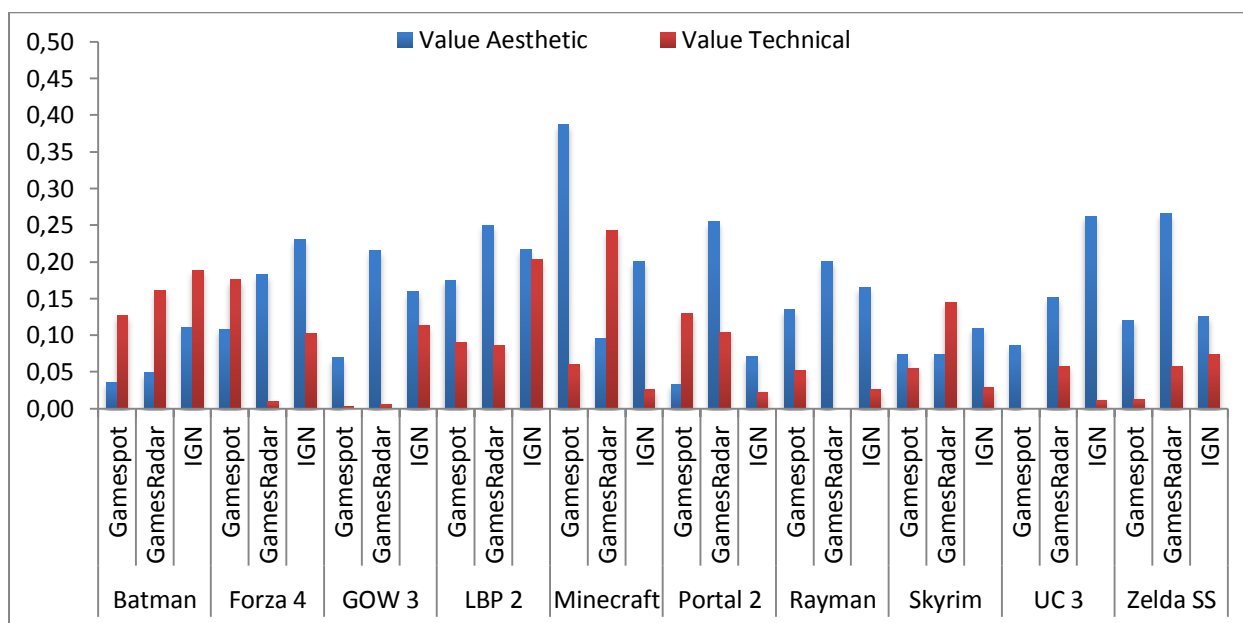
 It is difficult to discern a pattern in this chart. There are a few games that are overwhelmingly aesthetic, with one exception being *Batman: Arkham City*, which is far more technical. Value depends heavily on the reviewer, as can be seen, for example, by the large disparities in ratios for the game *Minecraft*, where *Gamespot* has a large amount of aesthetic statements, and *GamesRadar* a large amount of technical ones, with *IGN* spending less on value altogether compared to other reviews.
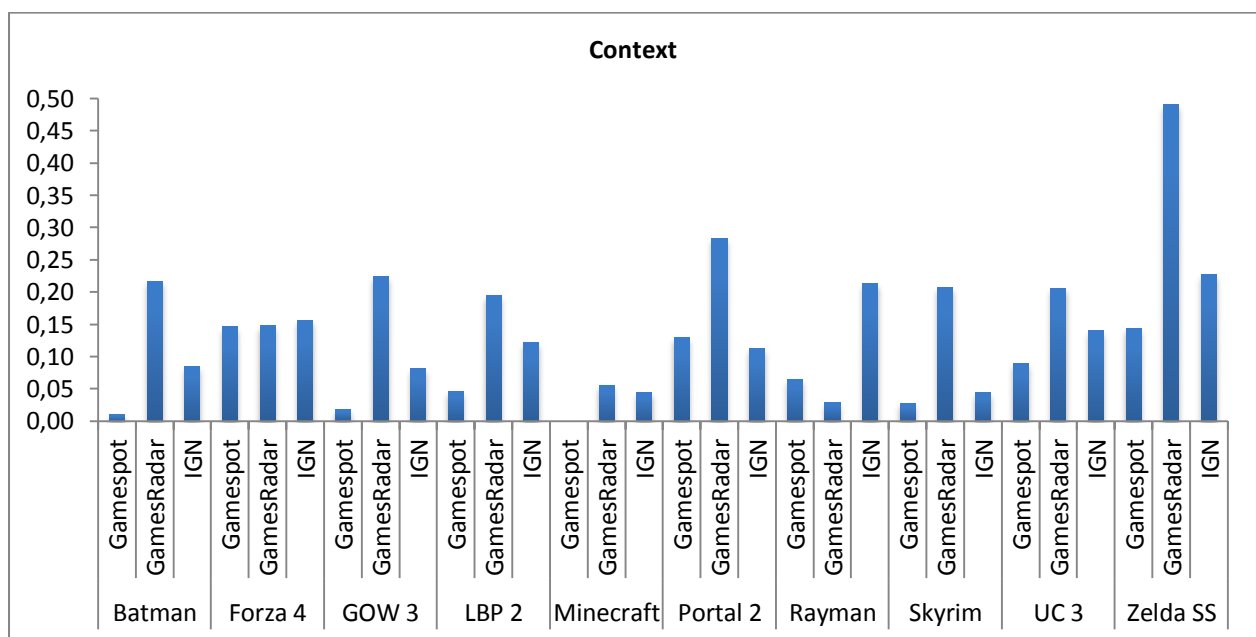
Context

Statements about context involve any reference to other games or other media. There is no way to distinguish between aesthetic or technical context because these statements are about placing a particular game and its features in a wider frame of reference. Providing more context can be seen as an indicator that videogames are cultural products that benefit from comparison to enhance the clarity and meaning of the review. Context is most frequently about prior games in a series, though occasionally other media are mentioned, especially in relation to narrative, sound and visuals.

An example of Context:

> *The tradeoff is that, while there's still plenty of exploration, there's no breathing room on the surface world like you'd find in an expansive area like Hyrule Field in Ocarina of Time or Twilight Princess. The lack of space on the surface though is mitigated by the openness of the sky world, and flying around exploring its various floating islands feels reminiscent of the sailing in Wind Waker, albeit on a smaller scale. (GamesRadar, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword)*

Chart 4.10 – Percentage of words for Context per review (N = 7531)

Some amount of context is provided for each game, but it varies per review. The high rates of context for *GamesRadar* are due to the fact that these reviews usually include a section comparing three games to the game in question. After *GamesRadar*, *IGN* includes the most context, and *Gamespot* provides the least. The amount of context for *Forza Motorsport 4* is due to the fact that it is being compared to *Forza Motorsport 3*, in order to indicate if the added features amount to enough reason to buy the newer version. *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* has a higher rate of context for this reason as well, since it is part of a long running series of games, and the review wishes to describe how much has or has not changed.

4.3 Remarks

There are a number of things that were noticed during the process of coding the reviews that are not reflected in the data. These remarks are nonetheless important, because they do have implications for how the theory and expectations match up with the results.

The writing style of the reviews is varied across the websites. But of particular importance is that the writing on *IGN* is noticeably less complicated, using a smaller vocabulary, simpler sentences, and being less overly descriptive. *Gamespot* and *GamesRadar* showed not only a more accomplished writing style, but the reviewers also seemed more knowledgeable. This may be due to the sites targeting different audiences. *IGN* covers a wider range of media and may appeal more to a younger or wider audience. Though of course this cannot be confirmed by the data, nor is there any research on this issue to make any claims.

Something that has to be noted is the format of the reviews as they appear on the different gaming websites. Though they are no longer reviews broken up section by section into story, graphics, sound and gameplay, there are some distinct differences between *IGN*, *Gamespot* and *GamesRadar*. Each review has the title of the game and a short blurb underneath usually giving a concise opinion, though *IGN* often leads in with a small verbalism. The different websites all have a way of breaking down the review into a summarized form. *Gamespot* places the good and the bad of the game above the review, which are the essential takeaways of the review. *GamesRadar* has a section at the end of the review where some points that the player will love or hate are described, and these are not always meant to be summary. *IGN* uses the older and more traditional approach of assigning a score to presentation, graphics, sound, gameplay and lasting appeal, and then displaying the overall score. These ways of summarizing can all have a different effect on the purpose of the review. *Gamespot* and *IGN* share the same writing structure by essentially having one large essay that is only interspersed with videos and screenshots. *GamesRadar* often has a breakup of titled paragraphs. This is somewhat easier to read than a large wall of text and also gives the writer an opportunity to set the tone and place emphasis. Another noticeable feature of *GamesRadar* reviews is that most of the time an "Is it better than…" section is included that compares the game being reviewed with three other games like it. Though it provides plenty of context, as can be seen from the data, this is not necessarily an advantage. The games that are compared can sometimes be very different, though both games are worth playing and have their own distinguishing features, rendering a comparison meaningless. This only works for very similar types of games.

4. 4 Hypotheses

At the beginning of this thesis there were some expectations about the results that can now be discussed. Using what has been learned from collecting the data, the four hypotheses can be further nuanced.

1. In general, technical elements are more prominently featured and discussed than aesthetic elements in the videogame reviews.

This expectation was born out of the notion that reviews are merely shopping guides in a market oriented industry. The reviews would therefore be more descriptive than evaluative. It actually ends up being the case that there is an almost equal balance between aesthetic and technical statements when everything is added up. When looking at the individual elements, statements about gameplay are more technical, but narrative, sound, visuals and value are all more aesthetic. For individual reviews, there are all sorts of ratios between aesthetic and technical statements, meaning that this hypothesis as it stands is clearly disproven. This does not yet say anything about how the market orientation influences the reviews however.

2. Certain types of games lend themselves better to aesthetically weighted reviews. For example, a racing game is less inclined to have an aesthetic review than an action adventure game.

To some degree this hypothesis holds a lot of merit. There are certainly examples of games that receive a greater degree of aesthetic attention, but there are also some other considerations to be made. The amount of aesthetic evaluation also depends on the code that is looked at, and no one game shows a consistency between websites. There are also examples of games, such as *Batman: Arkham City*, that have more technically inclined reviews, but the type and genre of the game does not indicate that this may or may not be the case, seeing as it is an action adventure with a heavy focus on narrative, gameplay and visuals. It seems that in general the amount of aesthetic versus technical statements depends on the approach of the reviewer.

3. The more commercial a website is, the more the reviews are technically inclined. In order from most commercial to least: IGN, Gamespot, GamesRadar.

When looking at the percentages, it turns out that the order of most technical to most aesthetic is actually *Gamespot*, *GamesRadar* and then *IGN*. Now it could be the case that *Gamespot* is more commercial than *IGN*, but *IGN* is most certainly more commercial than *GamesRadar*. An attempt to look at the influence of the games industry on reviews through this data cannot be made. Either reviewers are working independently or using the distinction between aesthetic and technical statements is not a good metric for answering questions about this subject. A deeper textual analysis would need to be done in order to say anything more definitive, as the more simplistic writing style of *IGN* gives some indication that it is possible to look into this further.

4. The more aesthetic a review is, the better it supports that they are legitimate art evaluation.

Since there was not an overwhelming amount more aesthetic statements than technical ones, it is safe to say that in order to determine whether videogame reviews are legitimate art evaluation, one has to delve deeper into an analysis of the writing. What can be said, however, is that there is clearly an attempt made by reviewers to provide a balance between evaluating and expressing feelings and describing the game and its features objectively. There is also the issue that the reviewers themselves do not make a distinction between aesthetic and technical statements, meaning their technical statements can also serve a purpose beyond simple description and buying advice.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The data shown in the previous chapter, the result of qualitatively coding 30 reviews for the elements of videogames, gives an indication that there is much left to be studied about videogame reviews and game criticism. Though the distinction between aesthetic and technical statements seemed at first straightforward, the qualitative nature of this study manifested itself in the decisions that had to be made to apply specific codes to pieces of text. A great deal of variance was created because of the different types of games and the diversity of approaches critics can take for each review. Yet the main question of the degree of aesthetic versus technical statements in a review and what this says about reviews as legitimate criticism can be answered to some degree. The roughly equal measure of aesthetic versus technical elements shows that there is an attempt to strike a balance between reporting on the features of the game and provide an opinion. Reviews are at their core recommendations for which cultural goods the consumer should buy into, but there is some room for closer readings of certain features and qualified personal opinions of the critic. The gameplay is still mostly descriptive, because the game needs to be explained in great detail, but this does not mean that reviews are merely shopping guides. Reviews serve as a way to determine what consumers should play or ignore and this is not necessarily a pursuit devoid of artistic importance. Critics wish to elevate the games that have outstanding qualities in order to push the medium forward, not just in technical advancements, but also in terms of storytelling, developing greater immersion, creating exciting new experiences, and tap into what make games unique and rewarding. Of course reviews still need improvement, because they do not often engage in the kind of critical discourse that encompasses outdated gameplay design, the impact of a simplistic narrative and bad voice acting, repeating safe formulas, and so on. But this improvement is happening. Review structures are being adjusted, there are more websites dedicated to providing personal opinions, and the industry itself is shifting in new directions.

5.2 Discussion

The theory that is already supplied in this thesis helps to build the reasoning for how and why the research was done, but at the heart of the motivation for this research lies the discussion that is taking place on many blogs about the nature of videogame reviews and the role of game criticism. Here is a good place to go back to this discussion and to see how the results stack up to the criticism of game reviews.

A big issue that comes up often is the issue of the inflated scoring system where only the 8 to 10 range matters. Manveer Heir, senior designer of *Mass Effect 3*, feels this way too, mostly because these scores apply extra pressure to development teams and a review that gives a game a less than perfect score can upset fans greatly (Klepek, 2012). The reviews that were selected for this thesis are all rated highly, and the score is not taken into account in the data, but this issue does indicate something about the role reviewers take. Hilgard and Klepek both mention that reviewers are more enthusiasts than critics. Hilgard argues that the rushed reviews and uninformed reviewers lead to too little discriminating criticism (2012). Klepek, on the other hand, points out that a review is useful as a way to find out if 60 dollars should be spent on it, but the publishers have made the words and scores of reviews meaningful, despite perhaps the fact that reviews do not impact sales too much, as people often already know if they are going to buy the game or not (2012). Yet a more poignant way of looking at this issue is that there is often so little disagreement over blockbuster titles. A recent debacle ensued over the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, which actually prompted action on the part of the developer pushed by angry fans, but the bad ending was not mentioned anywhere in the reviews. When a big name game like *Gears of War 3* is almost universally praised and there are hardly dissenting opinions, this raises some suspicions (Thier, 2012). Clearly, the role that reviews have in the game industry is troubled, though the results of this thesis show that these criticisms may not be the last word.

Hilgard feels that there is not enough emphasis on the gameplay in reviews, but rather on the emotions and storytelling, causing there to be a lack of knowledge on whether the actions in the game are interesting, challenging or fun. He says that reviews are "generally 60% plot, 20% raw mechanic, and 20% technical information as to whether the game runs well on particular hardware" (2012). Polansky also laments that reviews are broken down into neat categories of "graphics, sound, gameplay, story—each one isolated and evaluated according to a very strict set of requirements" (2012). She wishes that games reviews were more holistic. Yet the results of this thesis show an entirely different picture. Gameplay is actually given the most attention, and narrative makes up a much smaller portion. Hilgard also says that reviews often simply describe the bugs and glitches a game has and fail to notice things like repetitive combat or bad writing. Yet this was generally not the case. The technical issues present in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* were given a lot of attention, but in the other games the quality and variety of gameplay was front and center in the evaluation. The different elements of the game were not broken down neatly, but rather interwoven and evaluated next to one another. Matt Thrower explains that he tries to set up a balance between

providing enough information without getting bogged down in the mechanics, while setting up a good argument for why he thinks the game is or is not worth playing (2012). There seems to be a real attempt made at figuring out exactly what makes the game work, and what parts of it add or detract from the experience, contrary to what Polanksy claims.

Though the content of reviews is open for debate, it may be more instrumental to look at what the role of criticism should be and see if the results of the reviews that were analyzed have something to say in this regard. It could be said that reviews are not a place for criticism at all, that they should simply serve as a way to say what design decisions did or did not work. And quality criticism on games seems to appear only on rare occasions, which is not always welcome because discriminating arguments can be met with a lot of resistance (Klepek, 2012). But it depends on how criticism is defined, because reviews may well apply then. Criticism is about discovering how art expresses itself and why, to improve the medium, and deconstruct the unique aspects and ideas games have to offer (Polansky, 2012). With the amount of aesthetic statements found in the results, this discovery is certainly happening on some level in reviews. Another advantage of reviews is that they focus on one particular game instead of providing more broad editorial style writing. Videogame reviews may not yet be in the best state as of now in terms of close reading and thorough analysis, but they can be a place for this (Thrower, 2012). Reviews have the potential to be more than be part of a marketing system. The sheer fact that the merits of criticism and how reviews can be improved are being discussed is proof of this.

A final point should be made about the development of reputations in the videogame industry. A function of criticism has always included some form of reputation building, yet the dynamic in the games industry is different than in a lot of other media and art worlds. There are very few singular game developers that are recognized as artists, such as Tim Schafer, and the amount of companies that are trusted to consistently output quality games, such as Blizzard or Valve, are also few. And these game makers and companies have developed a reputation because of they have a large amount of dedicated fans. Since high review scores are most often more of a predictor than a cause of success means that critics play a much smaller role in reputation building. Creating hierarchies and including and excluding particular games is only done in terms of quality and enjoyment, not in terms of art. The Kickstarter projects show this very clearly, because these are entirely based on the contributions of fans. But fans, in turn, are not a good source of criticism. They also rely on the discussions around games to help formulate clearer opinions. And in this way, reviewers,

with the amount of aesthetic content that can already be seen from the data presented here, can only go further in developing this role.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

The results of this thesis are far from conclusive research on the topic of videogame reviews. In this section some suggestions for different kinds of research on this type of videogame criticism are presented, and this section also serves as a way to reflect on how the methods can be improved.

An assumption that was made by the method described in the third chapter is that the reviews with higher scores are more likely to include aesthetic statements because low scores are often a result of poor technical performance. Although the criticism in the discussion above would suggest that this assumption is not altogether unfounded, more reviews with a wider variety of scores could be analyzed, to see if a different breakdown of elements can be seen overall and per score range. The method here also focused on 30 reviews, but did not include any information about particular reviewers. Since the reputation and legitimacy of videogame critics receives even less attention in the videogame community than the reviews, this is a topic that could benefit from further insight. It is perhaps possible to interview videogame critics about what they feel the purpose of reviewing and criticism is. Additionally, as Debenedetti submits, certain superstar critics can be identified that pave the way for new perspectives and conventions and greater independence. Or different types of elitist or popular critics and the amount of consensus can be determined (2006: 34).

Besides the range of the reviews, the codes that were used for this thesis have also proven to be somewhat limited. Though open coding has been done to look at the content of videogame reviews, the deductive approach could be further expanded by including criteria from other types of reviews of cultural goods and a broader range of concepts from aesthetic theories. A comparison can be made between the videogame industry and the film industry, since they not only influence each other, but have similar issues in terms of risk management, production differentiation, distribution, marketing, and so on.

Finally, the games industry is a major market, so this can also be taken into account when looking at it as a cultural industry. There are a host of business models available, and the possibilities are expanding even now, as the surge of game related Kickstarter projects has shown. These models are interesting for many industries, and the balance between market and artistic values can be weighed for each of them, as well as the best indicators of success. The correlation between game scores and market success has been done to some extent with

sales figures, but the success of a game can also be evaluated in terms of how long the players support it, how many resources the company spends on the game, even after its release, the potential for new intellectual property to become a major asset and produce a series, and the amount of reviews that are written about the game, which can be an indicator of success according to Bourdieu. But the games industry is not just about AAA titles. There is also a large indie community, which represents a field of restricted production, though digital distribution has allowed indie games to become breakout successes. Furthermore, there is a slowly expanding art scene around videogames, such as the iam8bit exhibition and the recent attempt at representing a canon by The Art of Videogames in the Smithsonian.

These suggestions can probably only come to fruition far in the future. The questions of what games are and if they can be art, along with social science issues, violence studies, the basic economics of the games industry, and design implications are still the current topics in videogame research. This thesis has merely tried to seek an approach from the arts and culture studies perspective, in order to inspire some greater depth in the research that takes videogames seriously at the outset rather than serve as a qualification.

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