

Viewing Let's Plays

How audiences interpret the commercial role of Let's Plays on YouTube

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In recent years, Let's Plays on YouTube have been majorly popular. However, early access privilege has led to concerns that some Let's Play content is biased. In order to study how viewers interpret the content, this thesis focused on how audiences of early access Let's Play videos on YouTube interpret the commercial role of the videos. A qualitative approach was taken. The sample existed out of ten early access Let's Plays that were hand-picked based on certain requirements. Five top comments were non-randomly collected from each video, including the nested comments below them. This led to a sample of 543 collected comments, which were then analyzed through textual discourse analysis. A coding frame was created in order to help with this process, which can be explained with the help of precious literature. The results found that a large part of the viewers value early access Let's Plays on YouTube for the social space that it provides to start discussions and share meanings. Furthermore, many viewers consider early access Let's Plays to be good tools for gaining knowledge, whilst only a handful of viewers actually use the content to make purchasing decisions. The social community that can be found in the social space of this game paratext can lead to collective practices of meaning making and gaining knowledge. This enhances the gaming capital of the viewers, which defines who they are as gamers, and in turn the feelings of belonging and community strengthens. This type of community and socialization also helps keep the Let's Play channels alive. Let's Plays are dependent on the platform and users, and they are also governed by the gaming industry. Comments provided almost no scrutiny of the promotional aspect of the early access Let's Play videos. Instead, early access preview of games has been portrayed as providers of knowledge and insight that they can use to make meanings and definitions within the social communities. Therefore, audiences interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Plays as helpful tools to socialize and gain knowledge with. Early access provides a glance of what is new and what is yet to come, and this enhances the viewer's understanding of games.

KEYWORDS: *Early Access, Let's Plays, Marketing Tools, Spectatorship, YouTube*

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1. Introduction

Video games have been the subject of many different discussions surrounding violence, education, and much more (Quandt et al., 2015). In recent years, Let's Plays have been majorly popular on a variety of different online video sharing and streaming platforms. Let's Plays are playthroughs of video games shared in a video or live video format, in which the games are promoted, reviewed, critiqued or satirized (Burwell & Miller, 2016). One of the websites on which the concept of Let's Plays have found most of its success is YouTube. YouTube is one of the biggest platforms for sharing user generated content (Schultes, Dorner, & Lehner, 2013), and it is the second most visited website after Google (Alexa, 2018). There is an uncountable number of YouTube channels whose creators are dedicated to the making and sharing of such Let's Plays, sometimes also dubbed 'gaming channels'. Users can subscribe to these channels, which allows them to stay up to date with the creator's uploads (Khan, 2016). The exact number of channels that are dedicated to Let's Play content is difficult to quantify as new channels are created daily. Anyone can become a Let's Player, as long as they have the gaming equipment and the technology to record it. However, it has been estimated that more than 20 of the top 100 channels on YouTube are related to gaming (Ramdurai, 2014). As of February 2018, PewDiePie is the most popular gaming channel on the platform, with a leading 60 million subscribers (Clark, 2018). Coming in second is ElRubiusOMG with 27.4 million subscribers, and in third place is Fernanfloo with 26.4 million subscribers. Gaming channels ranked below third place still have millions of subscribers as well. This portrays the great interest in gaming channels, as they generate a huge following, reaching numbers that other channels cannot even begin to imagine. PewDiePie, the YouTuber with the most subscribers, started off as a gaming channel sharing Let's Play videos with all of his followers. He screen-recorded and uploaded videos of himself playing horror games, such as *Amnesia*, and entertained his audience with his scare reactions (Smith, Obrist, & Wright, 2013). After some time, he included webcam footage for a visual representation of his scare reactions. After finding success, he made a living out of creating content with ad revenue and paid promotions. Whilst he gave some critiques on the game, his audience engaged with him on what they enjoyed and what they did not.

There is a great amount of engagement on Let's Plays. Gluck (2012) defines engagement as a user-initiated action. YouTube encourages both active and passive engagement. Active engagement entails participation that requires taking action, such as liking or commenting. Passive engagement is participation that requires no effort, such as

viewing a video and lurking amongst the comments. Much like Khan, this paper views engagement as “an individual’s interaction with media” (p. 237), but in this paper only active participation is taken into consideration, as passive participation is much more difficult to analyze. YouTube users can interact with each other in multiple ways, such as uploading a video, commenting on or sharing a video, and liking or disliking a video (Khan, 2016). These are all active forms of participation. Comments can be viewed as user generated content, and they may encourage interaction and discussion amongst users (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). With the ability to share user generated content, users are invited to be more creative, and businesses have new opportunities for reaching audiences (Cha, Kwak, Rodrigues, Ahn, & Moon, 2007). Furthermore, for studies such as these, the engagement opportunities provided by YouTube are critical as it allows one to analyze the thoughts that were shared by the viewers. Thoughts shared can indicate meanings that were created, which in turns helps one understand how someone makes sense of certain content.

However, Let’s Plays have been a problematic topic of discussion surrounding copyright laws and fair use. Critics, especially game production companies, argue that Let’s Plays exploit video games and that they are illegal due to copyright (Pfeil, 2015; Postel, 2016; Taylor, 2015). Nevertheless, since Let’s Plays are not an actual reproduction of the game, they can fall under the fair use exception of copyright law. Furthermore, some game developers fear the potentially negative effects of Let’s Plays on their market (Meija, 2013). Though these fears have been voiced and acted upon by many video game companies, there is no real proof to support the claim that Let’s Play have a negative effect on markets. Rather, there is more support to argue that it has a positive effect instead (Meija, 2013; Pfeil, 2015). Some video game publishers see Let’s Plays as a way of promoting their products instead, and they allow Let’s Plays of their video games to be produced (Meija, 2013). In some cases, YouTubers would gain early access to video games that have yet to be released in order to give the audience a preview of the content. In return, they receive some form of payment. This type of paid promotion is becoming increasingly popular on gaming channels on YouTube. Critics are concerned that this might result in biases from Let’s Players that are in favor of the games they are promoting. Reviews that are favorably biased due to paid promotion are worrisome for the audience, as the opinions shared throughout the Let’s Play might not always be truthful. However, one could say that in the case of early access Let’s Plays, the promotional aspect of the content is obvious to the subscribers as they are aware that a collaboration with a video game company is what made the early access content possible. Hence, the audience takes this promotional aspect in consideration when making

meaning of the Let's Play content. This makes early access Let's Play videos a very interesting subject to study with the help of the audience's interactions in the comments. In a time of new copyright laws and scandals, the gaming channels on YouTube are thriving from collaborations with video game companies. Therefore, how the audience interprets the commercial role of early access Let's Plays is an interesting topic that deserves looking into, as negative connotations with early access might be damning to the potential of Let's Plays as a marketing tool.

Interpretation is a complex process (Fairclough, 2003). It depends partly on understanding, but also on judgment and evaluation. In this case the audience's interpretation of the commercial role of Let's Play videos narrates how they make sense of the content's purposes in relation to its promotional efforts. It is based on meaning-making, in which it is important how the audience understands the messages that they have received with the help of their own judgements, opinions and values. The audiences of Let's Plays might interpret the content as biased promotion work or as honest reviews, as a moment for relaxing enjoyment or as a tool for purchasing decisions, as a moment to compare mastery or as a tool for social interaction. These differing interpretations of the content with their positive and negative connotations can lead to an answer to the question of how audiences interpret the commercial role of Let's Play videos. Therefore, this thesis studied Let's Play videos of early access previews of video games uploaded to YouTube, and answered how viewers make sense of the commercial role of this type of content. A qualitative approach was conducted. Top comments and their collected responses were analyzed for discourses and meanings through textual discourse analysis. A coding frame was made with the help of previous literature and existing theories. The research question of this paper is as follows:

How do audiences of early access Let's Plays on YouTube interpret the commercial role of the videos?

The research question of this thesis is scientifically relevant because there are no other studies on how audiences interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Play content. This is because the practice of promotional content for video games in the form of early access Let's Plays is quite new and not documented in previous literature. There are many studies regarding video games and their audiences, however engagement with Let's Play videos is very different from engagement with video games, as the audiences of Let's Plays are not in control of the situation. Furthermore, video game audiences solely try to make sense of the messages within the game, whilst Let's Play audiences make meaning of the messages

they receive from both the game and the Let's Player. In this sense, Let's Plays can be likened to book reviews or film reviews, but neither of these types of content include early access possibilities. The early access aspect is something unique to Let's Plays, something new and yet to be studied. There have also been many studies conducted on user generated content such as the videos found on YouTube, yet early access Let's Plays are not purely user generated content as they are made in collaboration with gaming companies who have some power over the outcome of the content. Thus, early access Let's Plays are something in between video games and pure user generated content. On the other hand, how viewers interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Plays can enlighten both content creators and video game developers. It is important to consider the role that Let's Plays play in the promotion of games (Burwell & Miller, 2016). With the gaming genre on YouTube growing, even expanding into a separate YouTube Gaming app, the gaming industry is at its height now more than ever, explaining the social relevance of this study. The business relationship between video game developers and gaming channels have created great opportunities for both parties. In order for gaming channels to succeed without any legal issues in the prospect of new and stricter copyright laws, collaboration with companies and promotional content is a welcome addition to help the genre thrive. Furthermore, gaming companies should learn more about their options for promotional content on platforms such as YouTube, as it could be valid marketing tool in the age of online entertainment. How the audience perceive the commercial role of early access Let's Plays is therefore an important question to answer to determine the future of the gaming genre on video platforms and the rise of the gaming industry.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of useful theories and findings on YouTube, Let's Plays, making meaning of Let's Plays, Let's Players and the audience, gameplay spectator personas, failure as fun, political economy of games, and the effects of Let's Plays on the market. Following, chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods used, the sample, the data collection, the data analysis, and the operationalization of the theory. Chapter 4 describes the results from the data analysis and discusses them. Lastly, chapter 5 concludes the discussion of the research findings and the research question is answered. At the end, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are given, and the paper is summarized in a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Background

This second chapter of the thesis engages with previous literature to provide theoretical background. The chapter discusses YouTube, Let's Plays, making meaning of Let's Plays, Let's Players and the community, motives for spectatorship, failure as fun, political economy of the gaming industry, and the market effect of Let's Plays.

2.1. Understanding YouTube

YouTube was created in 2005 and per 2013 acquires half a billion users per month (Madden, Ruthven, & McMenemy, 2013). Users can create profiles, called 'channels', on which users can share their own or their favorite videos. One can become a fan or follower by subscribing to such channel, after which the uploads of the channel subscribed to appear on a time line on the home page of the users. Whilst watching a video, one can choose to like (thumbs up) or dislike (thumbs down) the video. It is also possible to post comments, and to respond to existing comments, creating a discussion. Comments with many replies get 'bumped' to the top of the comment section. Replies to comments are displayed below the original comment. The reply thread is collapsible to show more or less replies to a specific comment which is why they are called nested comments. Comments can also be liked or disliked, however only the number of likes is displayed. When a comment receives many likes, it also gets bumped to the top of the comment section. Comments can be pinned or hearted by the creator of the video that is being commented on. Pinned comments are bumped to the top of the comment section as well. Furthermore, it is possible for viewers to save and share the videos through playlists or with the help of shareable links. Interacting with a video by leaving a like, dislike, comment or favorite is an indication of popularity, as these actions require more effort than simply viewing a video (Chatzopoulou, Sheng, & Faloutsos, 2010).

According to Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández and Coromina (2018) YouTube has a 'ranking culture'. Firstly, the more controversial videos are often ranked high on the search list on YouTube. These include videos that discuss contemporary and controversial topics. Contemporary topics are those that are on trend and are of current discussion in the community. Controversial topics are those that are surrounded by heated discussions and are often categorized by disagreement between actors. Secondly, recommendations and subscriptions heavily influence the search rankings of YouTube videos. This means that channels with a huge following are privileged and often more successful in gaining views. New channels with smaller subscription counts will therefore experience difficulty in gaining reach. Lastly, YouTube's native content is dominant in search rankings as well, suggesting

that native content enjoys privileges that non-native content does not. Native content on YouTube are videos that are created by users on the platform, and that have no relations to outside companies, such as vlogs. Non-native content are videos that are produced by companies for outside purposes and not solely for YouTube, such as commercial news broadcastings. In this case, Let's Plays are native content on YouTube, as they are created by users on the platform. However, early access and paid promotion Let's Play content is not purely user generated, as game companies have some say in what the videos consists of. For example, they might provide only a small section of the game for gameplay, or they might provide a pre-made recording of gameplay for YouTubers to upload and comment on.

The ranking culture is also prevalent in the comment section. Whilst the date that the comment was placed is taken into consideration during the ranking process, comments are not only shown in chronological order. Most of the top comments in the comment section are those with the most likes and replies and those that are pinned. The ranking based on likes and replies include complex ratio calculations that are not entirely clear. Furthermore, it has been speculated the author of the comment's past engagement might influence the ranking as well. The like/dislike ratio for every public comment posted by a user is calculated, and those with a high ratio will most likely find their comment at the top of the comment section.

2.2. Understanding Let's Plays

Let's Plays are user generated content of a video game playthrough, mostly made by fans or reviewers (Taylor, 2015). Let's Plays are different from 'Playthroughs' or 'Walkthroughs', which are manuals for video game (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, & Zeiler, 2014).

Playthroughs or Walkthroughs advise the viewers what the easiest and fastest ways are to play a game. Let's Plays on the other hand focus on the experience of a game, specifically the player's experience. They are not supposed to be manuals for the game. In order to voice the experience, Let's Players add spoken commentary, whether positive or negative, throughout the gameplay (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014; Taylor, 2015). Sometimes video images of the player's facial reactions are included in the video as well (Radde-Antweiler et al, 2014). In the spoken commentary, players can express their thoughts and opinions on the game. They can react to the game's story and express feelings such as fear. They may also make jokes or talk about their personal lives. This is exclusive to Let's Play content, as Playthroughs or Walkthroughs do not provide comments or video images of the player, as their thoughts and opinions are not of importance to their viewers. Video images of the players face allows for the viewers to take part in the gaming experience. As Radde-Antweiler et al. puts it, it is

"opening up another level beyond audio and reveals not only verbal information but also non-verbal facial expressions" (p. 17). The commentary and facial expressions also allow the Let's Player to express their personality, something that is not necessary in Playthroughs or Walkthroughs. Viewers of Let's Plays may find enjoyment in the entertainment that both the gameplay and the player's personality provide (Smith et al., 2013). Besides uploading pre-recorded Let's Play videos to online platforms, they can also be livestreamed. Other formats that can be found both in videos and on livestreams are e-sports and speedrunning. E-sports describes competitively playing video games. There are e-sport tournaments with professional leagues, in which competition is key. Speedrunning describes the challenge of trying to complete a game as fast as possible. This revolves around skill, and speedrunning videos often work as manuals for others to follow. Unlike these two formats of gameplay content, Let's Plays do not revolve around competition or skill. As mentioned before, Let's Plays are entertainment. Smith et al. states that Let's Plays "can be thought of a narrative commentary on an experience as it is being experienced" (p. 133). Therefore, Let's Plays are informal and success is not based on a player's skill. A popular example of Let's Plays is PewDiePie's *Amnesia* series. In this series of videos, PewDiePie recorded himself playing the survival-horror game *Amnesia*, in which he included spoken commentary. Later in the series, video images of his facial reactions were placed in top left corner of the Let's Play video. PewDiePie gained many subscribers with this series, as the viewers enjoyed experiencing the game along with him. He would often get scared or scream during the game, something his subscribers found entertaining. Furthermore, he created his own story and universe within the game, giving in-game objects names and creating relationships with them. Not every Let's Player includes this type of storytelling in their videos, and styles can vary dramatically.

Let's Plays do not rely on storytelling, but rather displays gameplay (Glas, 2015). The spoken commentary and facial reactions of the player are the source of amusement for viewers. These reactions, whether they are made through audio or video image, make it possible for the viewers to identify with the players. Thus, this enables viewers to immerse in the gaming experience. Still, the viewers understand that they are not actually playing the game. They are very aware that the actions they see are being made by the Let's Player, and that they have no real control over the gameplay. Therefore, regarding Let's Play videos, Glas argues that "the combination between ludic immersion and non-ludic engagement offers an experience of vicarious play" (p. 84). This suggests that the ability for the viewers to immerse in the gaming experience whilst spectating gameplay and the inability for viewers to control to game leads to an experience of play through the actions of another person, i.e. the player.

The content of Let's Plays can be varied in their purposes (Burwell & Miller, 2016). Creators of the content may try to promote, review or satirize a game. Whilst almost always their main purpose is to entertain the audience, they may also try to show off their skill, make a profit, or participate in a community. However, it has been noted that the skill level of the Let's Player is not important, but rather the entertaining experience created in the content itself (Smith et al., 2013). According to Meija (2013), Let's Plays add to "the larger body of work that surround the industry" (p. 30). Furthermore, the criticism provided in Let's Play videos have a similar purpose to book reviews, as they both provide personal opinions on which the audience base their buying decisions.

When a Let's Player receives early access to a game from a company, the Let's Plays are often titled 'preview' or 'early access'. The player can either receive an early copy of the game, or they are invited to visit the game company's studio to play the game. They then play the game and record the experience including their commentary. In some instances, the Let's Player is not allowed to play the game themselves. Instead, they receive a pre-made recording of gameplay of an unreleased game, which they can provide their own commentary on and upload to their channel. The point of early access Let's Plays is that it is uploaded before the release of the game to provide an insight of the game for the viewers. It also works as a valid marketing strategy, as Let's Players are influential in the gaming community and can convince their viewers to buy a game once it is released. However, many viewers do not agree with the unfairness of early access to creators of Let's Plays, and they are also concerned with the potentially biased opinions given throughout the videos. Still, some viewers enjoy early access previews in the form of Let's Plays as it allows outsider perspectives and reflections on a new game, and it can help in making purchasing decisions.

2.3. Making Meaning of Let's Plays

According to Consalvo (2007), beyond video games themselves, the game culture includes many different discourses, texts and practices, called games 'paratext'. These include professionally produced materials such as guidebooks and merchandise, as well as user generated content such as reviews and fan art. Consalvo argues that these paratexts teach the audience how to play and think about games as well as about themselves as gamers, suggesting that paratexts are central to the experience of gameplay. Let's Plays are an example of such games paratexts. They give games new meanings and alter the medium of the original content, turning games into a video to watch rather than a game to play for the viewers (Burwell & Miller, 2016). There is no interaction with the game, only with other

viewers or with the player. The gamers interact with one another and gain knowledge about games through the 'social space' of paratexts (Consalvo, 2007). Taking away the interaction with the game itself may seem like a diminishment of the game experience, however according to Burwell and Miller (2016) it provides an opportunity for the audience to reflect on video games and gameplay. The viewers connect the gameplay with life experiences and create meanings this way, showcasing these thoughts and meanings in the comment section. These comments also portray differing opinions and views, suggesting a collective practice in making meaning of the content. On the other hand, the meaning of the game is also changed for the creators of Let's Plays, as it becomes more of a performance. They must create a persona, build an audience, and make decisions about their mannerisms and speech. Let's Plays can also reveal how gamers create meaning, as the creators of the content add voice-overs that explain their way of playing, their knowledge on games and the industry, and how they feel about the game. Not only the voice-over, but also inserted video footage of the player can portray their emotions and reactions during gameplay, creating more meaning for the viewers.

Through the metagame of Let's Plays gamers can gain gaming capital (Burwell & Miller, 2016; Consalvo, 2007). 'Metagaming' has many different meanings, but generally means partaking in video game activities that are outside of the game itself but still important to the overall game experience (Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2012). Metagames are the games around the game (Love, 2014). Metagaming can happen during the gaming experience, but it is not the game itself. It can also be described as the social aspect of games in which players look up paratexts to complete their experience of the game. As explained before, Let's Plays are part of the gaming paratext, where players can share, learn and discuss (Consalvo, 2007). Therefore, viewing Let's Plays can be called metagaming. Paratexts are central in gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007; Love, 2014). 'Gaming capital' explains the value system that players use to define their gaming experience. It helps gamers define themselves as 'gamers' and it helps players define 'good' games. It is what helps them separate themselves from 'none-gamers'. Playing good games, having the necessary skills to finish a game, and never asking for help are constructed gaming capital. Knowledge about games is an important gaming capital, and this knowledge is acquired through the consumption of paratexts (Consalvo, 2007). Early access Let's Plays provide insights that helped gamers possess gaming capital such as knowledge about the newest games, their content, and tricks that could be used in the games (Burwell & Miller, 2016).

As mentioned, Let's Plays allow viewers to make meaning of a video game, life

experiences, and themselves (Burwell & Miller, 2016). Meanings are often created and shared through discourses. Macdonald (2003) describes discourse as “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking” (p. 10). He further states that we select language based on unacknowledged conventions, but it allows for variations. It is through discourse that we can shape and exchange ideas of reality, though it does not reflect reality. Additionally, meaning-making depends not only on what is explicitly stated, but also what is implicit and can be assumed (Fairclough, 2003). These ‘unsaid’ assumptions are what discourse analysis tries to identify.

According to Rogers (2013), there is a difference between objects, content, and environments that are created in a new medium and those that have 'migrated' to it. The migrated content can be called the digitized, whilst the content that has been created or was 'born' in a new medium can be called the natively digital. An example of a natively digital object is cookies. These objects are difficult to translate to real life. One could argue that the virtual social space created by Let's Play videos on YouTube is a natively digital environment with natively digital objects and content. One such object is the like button. The terms 'like' and 'dislike' as a rating tool were born on the Web, and whilst the meaning can be understood outside of the Web, they are still hard to translate to real life concepts. A like can mean many things, and so this object cannot be translated to a single meaning in real life. The same counts for terms such as subscribing and favoriting. Moreover, whilst the activity of leaving a comment can be seen as digitized as it resembles any type of textual conversation outside of new media, they are nonetheless difficult to translate to real life meanings. For example, some phrases are inherently used on YouTube only, such as ‘Please like and subscribe’. Once the discourses behind natively digital content are analyzed, one should be able to understand the meanings that were made.

2.4. Let’s Players and the Community

The increase of popularity user generated content brought along with it the ‘micro-celebrity’ (Senft, 2008). The micro-celebrity maintains an online audience through social media and online media sharing platforms, much like YouTube. The audience is viewed as a fan base, and the micro-celebrity’s strategic self-presentation is consumed by these fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008). Self-branding stands central to the concept of micro-celebrities. Through self-branding, one creates a unique public identity for commercial gain or cultural capital (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Self-branding helps create a memorable image to

which others can relate or look up to. Inherently, self-branding is promoting an image of oneself, and is part of the attention economy in which marketing value is assigned to those who can attract the most attention through self-mediation (Marwick, 2015). Let's Players partake in self-mediation through their content and often create their own personalities which are likeable for their subscribers. In the context of Let's Plays, 'parasocial interactions' are very prevalent. Parasocial relationships describes the illusion of real friendships with (micro-)celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017). The audience addresses the celebrity as their friend regardless of whether or not they have had two-sided communication before. Let's Players might respond to some comments on their video content, but this depends on their level of engagement with fans. Nonetheless, even without the Let's Players engagement with their fans, the parasocial relationships created through online platforms strengthens the presence of a community.

It can be said that a social community is fostered through engagement on Let's Play videos. Let's Plays function as production sites for social relations, in which the perspectives of both the creator of the content and the audience members are considered and discussed (Burwell & Miller, 2016). According to the 'third place' framework (Oldenburg, 1997), which has been applied to virtual communities by Rheingold (1993), conversation is the main activity. This third place should foster sociability and have regulars, which are those who visit often. The feeling of community and membership satisfies needs and motivates future participation (Hamilton, Garretson, & Kerne, 2014). Identification with the content, the player, and the community are important aspects for creating and joining such a gaming community. Radde-Antweiler et al. (2014) view Let's Plays as a new 'gameenvironment', an environment of the game community. According to them, Let's Plays make it possible for players to share their gaming experiences, and for audiences to share their opinions and interpretations of the game, the Let's Play, the creator of the video, or their own gaming experiences. People are also drawn to communities that they can influence and impact (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This is why having the opportunity to have a voice, by commenting or reacting to a poll on the video, is so important.

2.5. Personas of Spectators

Smith et al. (2013) discuss viewer incentives behind Let's Play and found multiple motives for spectating gameplay. They made use of Cheung and Huang (2011) spectator incentives with regards to e-sports, who created nine personas to explain the incentives. These nine personas are: The Bystander, The Curious, The Inspired, The Pupil, The Unsatisfied, The

Entertained, The Assistant, The Commentator, and The Crowd. Smith et al. (2013) state that four of these personas are irrelevant to the Let's Play community, namely The Bystander, The Pupil, The Commentator, and The Crowd. The Bystander persona describes those who are not actively involved with the game spectatorship. There is the 'uninformed' Bystander, who does not understand the meaning of the acts that occur in-game, and there is the 'uninvested' Bystander, that understand the game but are simply spectating by accident. The Pupil persona wants to gain knowledge on a game through spectatorship. This persona is interested in taking that knowledge and putting it into practice in order to develop their skills. Smith et al. mentions that The Pupil persona did not apply to any of the incentives found during their study. The Commentator is a viewer who performs commentary during the gameplay. In the Let's Play community it is not a viewer but the Let's Player who serves as The Commentator, adding their own comments during their gameplay. The Crowd persona enjoys spectating as a group. This context does not apply to YouTube Let's Play spectatorship, as viewers mostly watch Let's Play videos on YouTube individually. With these four personas deemed irrelevant for Let's Play communities by Smith et al., the five remaining personas are most common. According to Smith et al., The Entertained persona prefers watching someone else play a game instead of playing the game themselves, and the charisma and personality of the Let's Play's creator often times adds more entertainment value. The Curious persona explain viewer incentives, as they try to fill a knowledge gap by watching more videos. Perhaps they would like to know more about the game itself or about the player, and by filling this knowledge gap they would feel more part of the community. Additionally, the viewer might want to try a game or strategy that they have never heard of before, and this describes The Inspired persona who wants to buy and try a game after watching a Let's Play. On the other hand, The Unsatisfied persona cannot afford the time, money or equipment and would rather view the game being played by someone else as a substitute for playing it themselves. Lastly, The Assistant persona can help point out information to the player and thereby alter the gameplay experience. For example, viewers can comment on Let's Play directing the player on what to do next. This type of behavior can also be called Co-laboring in Spectatorship, in which one works together with the player for entertainment purposes. The Assistant persona might also point out mistakes the player made and guide them towards a solution. This type of engagement compares the viewer's skill to the player's, in which a player's failure may lead to a viewer's enjoyment.

2.6. Failure is Fun

Juul (2013) explains that failure in gameplay can lead to both positive and negative emotions, but positive emotions are more enjoyable and make the experience more meaningful. Failure is defined by Juul as a manifestation of the player's limitations and is synonymous to a lack of skill. However, during interactive gameplay the player is in control of the story and its outcomes, unlike more passive game spectatorship. If the negative experience of failure is too much to handle, the player can choose to stop, but must still face the issues in order to complete the game. Still, easy games are no fun, as players enjoy improving throughout a game and using their new skills to solve challenges. Transforming frustration from failure into the motivation to learn, grow, improve is what Juul calls the Art of Failure. One should therefore accept failure as paving the path to personal enhancement.

That motivation eventually leads to finding a solution to a problem in a game. When this occurs, one might experience positive emotions and feelings of mastery. Mastery refers to using challenging activities to work on building up new skills (Reinecke, Klatt, & Krämer., 2011). It is suggested that interactive media can lead to strong experiences of mastery, especially video games. Video games provide challenges, competition, and feelings of accomplishment (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006, Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006). This is because video games confront players with problems that need a solution in order to be completed (Reinecke et al., 2011).

Noninteractive media can also provide feelings of mastery, for example when an individual knows the answer to a question in a quiz on a television show (Reinecke et al., 2011). In the case of Let's Plays, viewers would experience feelings of mastery when they are ahead of the player in finding a solution to a problem in the game. This does not necessarily require for the viewers to have previously played the game. Viewers of Let's Plays can solve in-game problems through cues giving within the gameplay or through discussions in the comment section. This ability creates a feeling a mastery and skill, in which the viewer compares themselves with other viewers and with the player in the video. When the player fails at the game, both negative and positive emotions may be felt by the audience. The viewers may be frustrated at the player's lack of skill, or they may feel better about their own skills in comparison to that of the player. In this sense, Juul's (2013) statement that failure is fun could still stand for passive game spectatorship in which the control of the story and its outcomes are not in the hands of the viewer. Rather than the control over the story, it is the comparison of mastery and skills that makes failure fun for Let's Play viewers.

2.7. Political Economy of the Gaming Industry

Political economy is the study of social relations and power relations that make up the production, distribution, and consumption of resources (Mosco, 1996). Such resources include cultural content, such as video games. The political economy of the cultural industry is changing through platformization (Poell, Nieborg, Brooke, Prey, & Cunningham, 2017). As a consequence, cultural content will always be dependent on platforms, and cultural content will be incessantly reworked based on user feedback. Due to their component-based software, video games have always been platform dependent and easily reworkable. Therefore, game publishers have always followed platform-native strategies for distribution and publication. There is a strong ‘winner-take-all-effect’ in the game industry, with only a couple games dominating the market. Game apps emerged from the surge of noteworthy digital platforms such as smartphones and tablets. The gaming industry gained access to a wider audience, as these new platforms offered more accessible games to more players. Along with this came ‘free-to-play’ games that included advertising and offered in-game purchases. This made the barrier for market entry of game apps very low, and the networks were overloaded with game app content which lead to game developers having to adjust their business models. This in turn made games even more dependent on users and platforms. The political economy of the gaming industry is dependent on many other factors with a winner-take-all-effect.

As games are made from component-based software, they have always been contingent on platforms and are easy to adapt to new platforms. Online video sharing platforms are an example that the gaming industry can benefit from. Early access Let’s Plays allow us to have a glance at games that have not yet been released. The gaming industry can use Let’s Plays as a venue to reach a wider audience and create a more multisided market. Early access content on video sharing platforms allow the ability for user feedback before the release of a game. This makes the game industry more dependent on the platform and the user feedback, which it can use to rework the game. In turn, a wider audience has been reached that might generate more sales. Let’s Plays on the other hand are not only dependent on platforms and users, but also on the gaming industry itself. Let’s Plays are governed by the gaming industry, as these content creators are precarious and simply a means to an end. In order to stay relevant and keep their audience’s attention, Let’s Players want to play the newest games to gain gaming capital and share it with their subscribers. This keeps the YouTube channels healthy and the community alive. YouTube as a platform is important for the existence of such communities and capital.

2.8. Let's Plays' Market Effect on the Gaming Industry

Walker (2014) states that a majority of creators of Let's Plays do not make any profit from their content, but Let's Plays still serve as promotional work for game companies, provide content for YouTube, and draw attention to advertisers. Therefore, the economic gain of their content is more considerable for others than for themselves (Burwell & Miller, 2016).

However, with YouTube's Partner Program, content creators can monetize their videos, which means that they can make money by posting content on the platform. They can make a profit of 55% from the advertising revenue. This revenue is created through the appearance of advertisements before, during, and after the video. Content creators on YouTube are known for and called out on stretching their videos out towards the 10-minute mark in order to be able to place an advertisement at the end of the video and get more revenue. Game companies that fear a negative market effect of Let's Plays have pushed back against the monetization of videos that display their games. Game companies often claim their content is copy written, and they have reported Let's Play videos for copyright infringement, to which creators of Let's Play's responded angrily (Postel, 2016). Reporting videos on YouTube for copyright infringement often leads to the videos being taken down and the uploader of the video receiving a warning. The result of Let's Play videos that are taken down is lost profit for the creator, who no longer receives ad revenue from a video they worked on and uploaded for their viewers.

Let's Plays fall in a grey area legally, and whilst they are argued to fall under the fair use exception of copyright law, this is not established (Pfeil, 2015; Postel, 2016). There has been some discussion regarding the effect of Let's Plays on the video game market (Pfeil, 2015). Taylor (2015) argues that Let's Plays do not harm the video game market, because they do not act as a substitute for playing the actual game. Let's Plays are an entirely different product with a very different audience (Meija, 2013). Meija views Let's Plays and its engagement as mostly fan-based activity. This author argues that fan-based works aim to grow a community, through discussion as well as exposure to lesser-known titles and products. This means that creators of Let's Plays are simply trying to spread the word and share something they like with others. Some companies do not view Let's Plays as causing harm to their market (Taylor, 2015). For example, Sony and Nintendo, two market leaders on game and console development, even encourage Let's Plays for marketing reasons. However, it could be argued that if the game is an audiovisual work, the audience would experience this through the Let's Play as it includes both sound and image. This would not be the case for older screenshot Let's Plays that were popular before the rise of popular video sharing

platforms. Screenshot Let's Plays were made up out of captured images during gameplay that were posted on gaming community forums in order to provide a look at the game for others. This type of content includes no audio and the shared imagery is minimal. Furthermore, some creators of Let's Plays choose to focus on the video game's flaws, which is obviously not in the developer's favor. This could potentially cause a negative effect on the market, but this is still difficult to prove. Negative opinions that are expressed during such a video are still valuable and do not necessarily cause harm to the market (Meija, 2013).

As mentioned above, there are many companies such as Microsoft and 2K Games that decided to allow or encourage Let's Plays, as long as it lives up to their regulations (Taylor, 2015). For example, such regulations would be that creators of Let's Plays are not allowed to earn compensation, or the video should not spoil the plot of the game. Others such as Blizzard Activision and Valve give full permission for the use of their video games in Let's Plays, and they have created less restrictions for Let's Players. For example, creators of Let's Plays are allowed to monetize their video, but otherwise the video games should be used non-commercially. Taylor argues that it is much more beneficial for game developers to give out some type of license for video game use within Let's Plays, as it avoids legal issues, shows care for fans' desires, and could make the companies more money. Let's Plays can coexist with the original game, and game developers are increasingly seeing the value of this type of content. Meija (2013) also argues that gaming companies would benefit from partnerships with YouTube creators and streamers, as there are studies that show that YouTube audiences' purchasing decisions can be influenced. Research has shown that user generated content can alter the audience's perception about a topic (Kim & Sun, 2006; Lee & Jang, 2010). In this case, not only the Let's Plays themselves might influence audience opinions, but also the comments added under the video, which include expressions of opinions (Khan, 2016). Schultes et al. (2013) found that most people read the comments on YouTube videos often, and that more than half read the first two or three comments after watching a video. According to Kaytoue, Silva, Cerf, Meira and Raïssi (2012), some Let's Plays serve as a tool to make a final decision on whether or not to buy a game. Furthermore, some games might just not be entertaining to watch, enticing the viewers to play the game themselves in the search for a better experience. Still, the authors found that if the upload date of the Let's Play video coincides with tournaments or release dates, this leads to growth of the game audience.

As mentioned before, sometimes content creators gain early access to video games that have yet to be released in order to give the audience a preview of the content. Early access Let's Plays are often part of paid promotions or sponsored content. This means that the

YouTube gets paid in order to release preview content of a video game on their channel before its release date. Sponsored content is very popular on all types of social media and with all kinds of (micro-)celebrities from diverse genres (Becker-Olsen, 2003). Sponsored Let's Plays carry some similarities with feature advertising as well. This type of content blurs the distinction between advertising and entertainment content (Cameron & Haley, 1992). The content itself is a big advertisement disguised as regular entertainment. Similar to feature advertising, Let's Players would not always mention that their content was sponsored if this was the case. Today, content creators are legally obliged to mention sponsorships and paid promotions. However, this does not mean that some find their way around this law by hiding the sponsorship details in the fine print or by adding the advertisement disclaimer days after posting the content. Nonetheless, in the case of early access Let's Plays, it is obvious to the viewers that the YouTuber has collaborated with a game company in order to produce the content. It is otherwise impossible for the YouTuber to have acquired access to the game material. Overall, there are some concerns with biased opinions regarding early access, as the privilege to play and the paid promotion would lead to favorable opinions from creators of Let's Plays in return. As with the huge influence these content creators have on the final purchase decision of their audience, the biased reviews of video games might be problematic.

2.9. Summary

YouTube is a video sharing platform that allows for interactions between users. These interactions include subscribing, commenting, liking, disliking, favoriting, and sharing. Most of these interactions are natively digital. Let's Plays are videos created by users, in which a video game is played. Let's Plays include spoken commentary and sometimes video images of the player's facial reactions. Viewers of Let's Plays can immerse in the gaming experience, but they cannot control the game. This leads to an experience of vicarious play through the actions of another person. The success of these videos is not based on competition or skill, but on the entertaining value. They are also not supposed to serve as manuals of the game. Let's Plays are paratexts that can spread gaming capital and that serve as a social space that fosters community and even parasocial relationships. In order to study gameplay spectatorship, nine personas that describe different possible incentives for gameplay spectatorship were created in previous literature, which are helpful for categorizing different types of viewers. The political economy of the gaming industry is dependent on platforms and users, and there is a strong winner-take-all-effect. Due to fear of the market effect, some game companies use copyright claims to push back against Let's Players monetizing their videos. However, other game

companies have decided to encourage Let's Plays, as long as it abides by their rules and regulations. One way that game companies partner with Let's Players is by providing them with early access to video games that have yet to be released. Nonetheless, early access Let's Plays are not always received well by the audience, as there are concerns regarding biased opinions from the player. These concerns might be voiced in the comment section. The comment section allows users to socialize as well as to give and receive information. Through discourse, ideas and meanings are shaped and exchanged in the comments.

3. Method

The third chapter of this thesis provides further information on the method used for the study. An overview of the sample, the data collection, the data analysis, and the operationalization of the theory is provided.

This paper aims to research how viewers of early access Let's Play videos on YouTube make sense of the commercial role of such videos. This is based on the comments placed under the videos, in order to allow for a wide range of insights. These comments highlight what meanings were made by the viewers. For example, comments can provide opinions and insights on the release of the game, on the game itself (such as graphics), on the player's game knowledge and skill, on the player's personality, and on the player's early access privilege.

In order to study how the audience interprets the commercial role of early access Let's Play video on YouTube, a qualitative approach is taken. This is done due to the sheer amount of information that YouTube comments can provide, which deserves extensive readings in order to analyze the meanings and discourses made in the comments. With the help of the qualitative method that is explained further in the next sections an answer was provided to the research question.

3.1. Conceptualization

YouTube is an online video platform (Madden et al., 2013). On this platform users can create channels on which users can share videos. Channels often adhere to specific genres, such as gaming or music. Nowadays, channels vary highly in popularity both outside and within genres. The most popular channel, named PewDiePie, is focused on gaming content and has a following of 58 million subscribers as of December 2017 (Clarke, 2018). It is possible for users to post comments on videos, and to respond to existing comments, creating a discussion. Furthermore, users can also share the videos, generating discussion elsewhere and building the community outside of YouTube.

Let's Plays are videos generated by users in which a video game is played and commented upon (Taylor, 2015). In this environment, the 'creators', 'players' or 'Let's Players' are those who created the video and are playing the game in the video, whilst the 'audience' or the 'viewers' are those viewing and interacting with the video, i.e. through comments. The latter are the subject of this study. Let's Plays are the main topic of this paper, as they are a new environment for gaming communities that allows for interaction and fosters discussion. They can be referred to as a game paratext, as viewers learn something by viewing the content, whether it is about the game or about themselves (Consalvo, 2007). This thesis

focuses on early access Let's Plays, which are preview gameplays that are made and uploaded before the release of the video game. This is possible when a video game publisher allows for early access at their studio or when they send early copies of the game to YouTube content creators. When early access is provided depends on the game publisher, as the start of a game's campaign can vary between a year to a month before the release date. Early access games were chosen as the topic of this study due to the controversial issues of quite straightforward game promotion. The concerns viewers have with early access content is often highlighted in their comments.

Comments exist out of text and emoticons but do not allow the inclusion of images or videos. This type of interaction was studied and analyzed during this research, as it holds more information than any of the other possible interactions on YouTube videos. The comments on Let's Play videos on YouTube are not in real time, as comments can be placed only after the upload of the video, which differs from a chat box during a livestream. Replies to comments are often hidden below the original comment. These are called nested comments. Comments can also be liked or disliked, which is a simple way of showing agreement or disagreement. This allows for discussion and opinion sharing, which is way for the audience the collectively create meaning. This is in line with the notion that the comment section is the social space of the paratext (Consalvo, 2007). Top comments are those that are 'bumped' to the top of the comment section mostly due to their sheer amount of likes and replies. These top comments show what the most enjoyed or most agreed upon remarks of viewers are. Comments are an important part of the Let's Play community, as they play many roles. Viewers can create discussions within the comments, ask questions and share knowledge amongst each other, whether it is about the game or about the player. Viewers can give their opinions on the content, and whether or not they enjoyed the game or the Let's Play video. This creates the opportunity to provide feedback and constructive criticism, from which both the Let's Player and game developers can benefit. Furthermore, comments allow the audience the somewhat control their experience of the content, directing the player and suggesting strategies. All of these roles that comments play can help build and support the Let's Play community, the Let's Players content, and the game industry and its developers.

The commercial role of an early access Let's Play video entails the aspects of the video that exist due to sponsorships. The role of the video in a commercial degree is its ability to sell and make commercial interest. How the viewers interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Play videos comes down to how they understand the purposes of the video in its promotional context. Interpretation is a complex process that depends on understanding,

judgment and evaluation (Fairclough, 2003). How the audience makes sense of early access Let's Play videos entails their interpretation of the content. Meaning-making is of great importance for this aspect, in which the audience understands the messages that they have received with the help of their own judgements and values.

3.2. Sample

The purpose of this research is to study the audience of Let's Plays. To do so, ten early access Let's Play videos from with approximately half an hour of gameplay and spoken commentary are carefully chosen to analyze the top comments from. A total of ten videos provided the amount of comments needed to validate the findings, which will be discussed later in this section. The videos chosen are GameRiot's preview of *A Way Out* (2018), EnterElysium's preview of *Frostpunk* (2018), TheRadBrad's preview of *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017), , AngryJoeShow's preview of *Prey* (2017), OfficialStuffPlus' preview of *Production Line* (2017), Marbozir's preview of *Civilization 6* (2016), Clare Siobhan's preview of *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim Special Edition* (2016), PewDiePie's preview of *The Last Guardian* (2016), ChristopherOdd's preview of *XCOM 2* (2016), and BestInSlot's preview of *Niche* (2016). As mentioned, the videos all include spoken commentary from which the audience can make meanings. In addition, four of the videos, namely those from PewDiePie, Markiplier, AngryJoeShow and Clare Siobhan, also included webcam recording of their faces. In these cases, the viewers can interpret the players' facial expressions as well besides the spoken commentary. The ten chosen videos all include previews of different video games in order to make sure that there is no repetition of the type of comments that are analyzed. This sample is representative of early access Let's Play videos on YouTube, as they are diverse in genre, view count and subscriptions to the channel. Different genres of video gameplay might attract different viewers whom interpret the content differently. For example, an early access Let's Play video of a horror game might attract both those who are interested in the new game or are simply there for entertainment. Whilst an early access Let's play video of a strategy game might just attract those who want to learn more about strategy in new games. The view count and subscription count give an indication of the video's popularity amongst the community as well as the channel's popularity on the platform. The ten videos chosen are from different YouTube channels with differing popularity on the platform according to their subscriber count, ranging from extremely popular to relatively unknown: PewDiePie, TheRadBrad, AngryJoeShow, GameRiot, Clare Siobhan, BestInSlot, ChristopherOdd, EnterElysium, Marbozir, and OfficialStuffPlus respectively. This would ensure diversity in the

characteristics and personas of the players, which could be part of the audiences' interpretation of the Let's Play. Moreover, how popular the player is amongst the community might also influence how the audiences interpret the commercial role of the video. To have this kind of diversity in Let's Plays on multiple levels helps ensure that the data provides a wide range of perspectives and interpretations, instead of static comments that mainly refer to one thing regarding the videos. Still, they are similar in length and type of content, ensuring the consistency of the content that is being viewed by the audience.

3.3. Data Collection

The data was collected non-randomly. After the 10 videos were carefully picked out according to the requirements that were mentioned above, the top five comments from each video were analyzed along with the nested comments that can be found below them. Comments posted by the uploader of the video were not taken into consideration. The top five comments are what the majority of the viewers see, influencing their process of meaning-making, and the top comments' high like counts indicate a consensus amongst the Let's Play viewing community. The nested comments give an insight into the discussion that follow, as conversation is the most important aspect of the social space of this paratext. PewDiePie's (2016) video had 23,180 comments, of which five top comments with 51 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 56 comments. BestInSlot's (2016) video had 714 comments, of which five top comments with 28 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 33 comments. TheRadBrad's (2017) video had 4,096 comments, of which five top comments with 101 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 106 comments. GameRiot's (2018) video had 493 comments, of which five top comments with 64 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 69 comments. AngryJoeShow's (2017) video had 2,371 comments, of which five top comments with 88 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 93 comments. Clare Siobhan's (2016) video had 5,698 comments, of which five top comments with 35 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 51 comments. Marbozir's (2016) video had 467 comments, of which five top comments with 25 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 30 comments. ChristopherOdd's (2016) video had 568 comments, of which five top comments with 17 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 22 comments. EnterElysium's (2018) video had 243 comments, of which five top comments with 36 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 41 comments. Lastly, OfficialStuffPlus' (2017) video had 171 comments, of which five top comments with 42 nested comments were analyzed, making a total of 47 comments. The sample existed out of a

total amount of 543 comments. These comments consisted of an average of one or two sentences. This would be enough to draw conclusions on discourses and interpretations made on the commercial aspects during game spectatorship.

3.4. Data Analysis

In order to understand how the audience interprets the commercial role of early access Let's Plays, textual discourse analysis was operated on all 543 comments. Discourse refers to the way of representing (Fairclough, 2003). In this sense, the text represents meaning that was made. Textual discourse analysis helped to come to an answer to the question of what interpretations were made by the viewers about the commercial role of the ten Let's Play videos. To do so, key words, themes, and word connotations in the comments were closely read. The perspective which themes were presented were identified. Then, variations were searched for as well as emphasis and detail in the text. It was also important to attend to what remained 'unsaid', what could be assumed. Additionally, intertextuality was considered, which denotes "how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize, and dialogue with other texts" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). This could be in the form of quotes, thoughts or summaries. Based on these factors, the comments are placed in the coding frame categories. This provided an overview of all the comments and their discourses.

3.5. Operationalization of Theory

A coding frame was made to categorize the comments that were analyzed. The three main coding categories were based on the type of content that could be found in the comment section. The categories can be explained with the help of previous literature.

The first coding category was 'Discussing the game'. In this category comments that discuss the video game shown in the early access Let's Play were placed. There were two subcategories in this category. In the subcategory 'Discussing the game itself' comments that discuss the game's graphics, controls, spec, et cetera were categorized. This relates to The Curious persona (Smith et al., 2013). The Curious persona is interested in gaining more knowledge of the game. This means that they might be seeking to learn more about a game's mechanics or story. Filling knowledge gaps on the game and the Let's Player makes The Curious Persona feel more a part of the community. This is also explained as the gaming capital. The authors of the comments in this subcategory are metagaming by looking up game paratexts such as Let's Plays. It is through paratexts that players can share, learn and discuss about games or about themselves (Consalvo, 2007). By doing so, players acquire gaming capital such as knowledge on the newest games (Burwell & Miller, 2016). A comment from

this subcategory would likely say something such as "I wish the graphics were better on this special edition of the game". In the subcategory 'Discussing buy the game' comments that mentioned wanting to buy the game or not are placed. This relates to The Inspired persona. The Inspired persona describes those who gain interest in the games they see in Let's Play videos, eventually wanting to buy and play the games themselves. In this sense Let's Plays serve as a tool to make a final decision on whether or not to buy a game (Kaytoue et al., 2012). A comment from this subcategory would likely say something such as "Now I cannot wait to get this game!"

The second coding category was 'Discussing the player'. In this category comments that discuss the player in the early access Let's Play video were placed. This category had two subcategories. In the subcategory 'Discussing the player's skills' comments that discuss the player's gaming skills during the Let's Play video were categorized. This relates to The Assistant persona. The Assistant persona describes those that try to help the Let's Player through the game. They could point out things that the Let's Player might have missed, or state some of the errors that were made. The Assistant can also find cues in the Let's Play or in the comment section that helps them find a solution to a problem, and this provides feelings of mastery. Experiencing failure, even if it is someone else's failure, and finding a solution leads to the experience of mastery (Juul, 2013). Therefore, even though the viewers are not in control of the story, the comparison of skill makes viewing Let's Plays fun. A comment from this subcategory would likely say something such as "You have to swing the toggle, not throw it". In the subcategory 'Discussing the player's personal life' comments that discuss the player's life, looks and personality were placed. This relates to The Curious persona as well (Smith et al., 2013). In this case, The Curious persona is interested in gaining more knowledge the Let's Player. This means that they might be seeking to learn more about the player's personality and life. It could be explained by status of the Let's Player as a micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008). This is part of the attention economy in which marketing value is assigned to those who can attract the most attention through self-mediation (Marwick, 2015). A comment from this subcategory would likely say something such as "I love that she gets all excited about the soundtrack of the game".

The third coding category was 'Socializing'. In this category comments that present an effort to socialize with others were placed. This could be in the form of jokes, small talk or requests for interaction. There were two subcategories in this category as well. In the subcategory 'Socializing with other viewers' comments that include socialization with others in the comment section were categorized. This relates to The Entertained persona. The

Entertained are viewing Let's Plays because they find it entertaining and because they want to socialize with others. Let's Players often add more to the game through their videos, by adding voices or stories around the game. These extra elements help the Let's Play videos stand on their own as entertainment, and it helps to create a community. It highlights the importance of YouTube as a platform in the political economy of the gaming industry (Poell et al., 2017). The YouTube channels must be kept healthy in order for the community to keep existing. This is important for both the content creator and the commenter. A comment from this subcategory would likely say something such as "Who else here has great childhood memories of this game?" In the subcategory 'Socializing with the player' comments that directly address the player were placed. This is known as parasocial interaction. Parasocial relationships describes the illusion of real friendships with (micro-)celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017). The audience addresses the celebrity as their friend regardless of whether or not they have had two-sided communication before. A comment from this subcategory would likely say something such as "I am so happy to see your face again!"

A 'Miscellaneous' category was also created for comments that left feedback on the video or audio quality of the content. The two subcategories of this category were 'Positive feedback on quality' and 'Negative feedback on quality'. These subcategories were important because these types of comments could convey appreciation or frustration with the content. A comment from this main category would likely say something such as "This was a really funny video!" or "The volume of your microphone is too loud, it is really annoying".

Table 1 presents an overview of the categories and subcategories. Comments were carefully dissected to be able to link back their meanings to one of the coding categories or otherwise placed in the Miscellaneous category. Please see appendix A for the coding frame with exemplary quotes.

Table 1.

Overview of the Categories and Subcategories of the Coding Frame

Categories	Subcategories	Explanation
Discussing the game	Discussing the game itself	Discusses the game and its graphics, controls, specs, et cetera, wants to gain knowledge on the game.
	Discussing buying the game	Discussed the idea of buying the game, either convinced, hesitant, or let down.
Discussing the player	Discussing the player's skills	Addresses the players gaming skills or lack therefore, compares their own skills with those of the player.
	Discussing the player's personal life	Addresses the player's personal life, looks or personality, is curious to know more about them.
Socializing	Socializing with other viewers	Tries to socialize with other viewers in the comment section, feels entertained.
	Socializing with the player	Directly addresses the player in their comment as if they are acquaintances.
Miscellaneous	Positive feedback on quality	Has positive feedback on the quality of the video, audio, or content, shows appreciation.
	Negative feedback on quality	Has negative feedback on the quality of the video, audio, or content, shows annoyance or frustration.

3.6. Summary

A qualitative approach was taken in order to answer the research question of this thesis. The sample existed out of 10 early access Let's Plays. All three videos included different video games played by different players. The sample is diverse in genre, view count and subscriptions. However, the videos are similar in length and type of content. From the comment section, the five top comments were selected for analyzation per video. The nested comments from every one of these five top comments as also analyzed. In total, 543

comments were analyzed. The comments were analyzed for meanings and discourses with the help of textual discourse analysis. A coding frame was made to analyze and categorize the comments. The three main coding categories were based on the type of content that can be found in the comment section and can be explained with the help of previous literature. Each main category had two subcategories. A 'Miscellaneous' category was added with two subcategories as well. After the analysis the results were written down, which can be read in the next chapter.

4. Results

In this fourth chapter of the thesis, the results of the analysis are given. In the first section, basic descriptions of the Let's Play videos' content are given. The second section presents the results from the textual discourse analysis done on the 543 collected comments, which is concluded with a discussion.

4.1. Description of the Let's Play Videos' Content

AngryJoeShow's early access Let's Play video of *Prey* is titled "*Prey - Angry Game Preview*" (2017). Right from the beginning of the video he mentions that the content in the video is a preview of a yet to be released video game. Both spoken commentary and face recordings are included in the Let's Play. Whilst he is playing the video on his own, he is accompanied by a friend who is spectating the gameplay. This friend makes some commentary as well. There is little explanation of the game, the content solely exists out of gameplay. Not many opinions about the game are expressed.

Marbozir's early access Let's Play video of *Civilization 6* is titled "*Civilization 6 Gameplay Preview (Civ 6 Early Pre-Release Footage)*" (2016). He immediately mentions that he was invited to an event where he had the opportunity to record preview gameplay of the unreleased game. Spoken commentary is included in the video. He does a lot of explaining of the game, starting off with an introduction to it before starting to play. A lot of positive opinions and thoughts on the game are shared.

Clare Siobhan's early access Let's Play video of *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim Special Edition* is titled "*SKYRIM SPECIAL EDITION! - FIRST LOOK EARLY GAMEPLAY!*" (2016). She mentioned in the beginning of the video that Bethesda, the game company, sent her an early preview of the video game. Both spoken commentary and face recordings are included in the video. She explains the game whilst playing it. Positive thoughts and opinions are expressed throughout the video.

OfficialStuffPlus' early access Let's Play video of *Production Line* is titled "*Production Line [Alpha] - Let's Play / Gameplay / Preview*" (2017). He mentions in the beginning of the video that the game is unfinished, but he does not mention who provided him with the preview of the game. Spoken commentary is included in the video. He explains the game whilst playing it. He does not give many thoughts or opinions on the game.

ChristopherOdd's early access Let's Play video of *XCOM 2* is titled "*XCOM 2 - Part 1 - Welcome Back to XCOM Recruits! - Let's Play - XCOM 2 Gameplay Preview [Legend]*" (2016). He does not mention that he was sent an early preview of the game, but he does

mention that he needs to edit out the cut scenes to prevent spoilers regarding the storyline. Spoken commentary is included in the video. He does not explain the game much, but he does give a tour of the character creation menu before he starts the gameplay. Positive opinions on the game are expressed throughout the video.

TheRadBrad's early access Let's Play video of *Assassin's Creed Origin* is titled "ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS EARLY WALKTHROUGH GAMEPLAY PART 1 - Aya (AC Origins)" (2017). He immediately mentions that he was invited to an event to record early preview gameplay of the game, but he was unable to attend. Therefore, the gaming company sent him pre-recorded gameplay footage. TheRadBrad includes his own spoken commentary over the gameplay. He does not explain the game, but he does provide many positive thoughts and opinions on the game.

EnterElysium's early access Let's Play video of *Frostpunk* is titled "FROSTPUNK / FROZEN APOCALYPSE PART 1 - FROSTPUNK FULL GAME PREVIEW Let's Play Gameplay" (2018). He immediately mentions that the content is a full campaign preview, however he does not mention who provided him with the preview of the game. His spoken commentary is included. During the gameplay he explains the game, but he does not provide many thoughts or opinions on it.

BestInSlot's early access Let's Play video of *Niche* is titled "Niche | A GENETICS SURVIVAL GAME (Alpha Preview)" (2016). In the beginning of the video he explains that the game is still unfinished, but he was sent the preview by the developer. He also mentions that anyone else can buy the early preview. Spoken commentary is included. BestInSlot explains the game during his gameplay, but he does not provide many personal opinions on the game.

PewDiePie's early access Let's Play video of *The Last Guardian* is titled "I WAITED 6 YEARS TO PLAY THIS.. The Last Guardian – Demo" (2016). He interrupted the introduction of his video to include the message that he has been given early access to the video game from Sony. He mentions that he is required to mention that according the U.S. guidelines. Both spoken commentary and face recordings are included in the video. He does not explain the game, but he tries to explain the experience of playing the game. Positive thoughts and opinions are provided as well.

GameRiot's early access Let's Play video of *A Way Out* is titled "A Way Out Gameplay Part 1 - BEST CO-OP GAME ????" (2018). He does not mention that he was sent an early preview of the game, but he does state the official release date. Spoken commentary is included. The game is a two-player co-op, and you see both players' screens during the

Let's Play. However, only GameRiot's spoken commentary is included. He quickly explains the game in the beginning of the video, and he provides both positive and negative opinions. He also mentions that the game is relatively cheap.

4.2. Discourse Analysis on Random Comments

The majority of the comments analyzed from AngryJoeShow's (2017) Let's Play video were placed in the 'Socializing with other viewers' subcategory. These comments included jokes and discussions with one another about the game or about the player's content, such as "Yes, he was. He says this was him playing at the convention, they just recorded commentary later when they got back" (mrlifeles21, 2017). These types of comments show the importance of YouTube as a platform where people can discuss meanings and provide alternatives to certain discourses. Some of these comments were concerned about whether or not AngryJoeShow was actually playing the game, as he did not explicitly state that the content was pre-recorded. The audience wanted honest content and is doubting the truthfulness of this Let's Play, as the player's reactions seemed awkward whilst seemingly faking gameplay over a prerecorded video. Here, the commercial role of the early access Let's Play is considered as a concern for honest quality. Some other comments were discussing the game itself. They discussed who the publisher was, how the game starts off, and they would often compare the games to other games, for example "It's not terrible like *Fallout 4*" (Coldrev E., 2017). These comments were curious about the new video game and wanted to gain more knowledge on it. Through the metagaming of viewing Let's Plays they gained gaming capital. Comments were also found discussing the player's skill. These comments showed some frustration with the gameplay and the player's ability to find solutions to problems within the game, such as "I don't know the password", while the password is displayed on the screen. People like you are the reason games keep getting dumber and dumber" (Alex Nil, 2017). The comments portrayed a more aggressive version of The Assistant persona. They all point out and correct the mistakes made by the player, which would lead to feelings of mastery. Lastly, some comments left negative feedback on the quality of the content, such as "Why are u pretending to play? It's very odd" (ItsAllGoodGames, 2017). They were not impressed with AngryJoeShow's pretense of holding a console and actually playing the game.

All of the comments analyzed from Marbozir's (2016) Let's Play video were categorized in the 'Socializing' main category. Only one comment trying to socialize with the player, namely "Damn, they called you. I remember being sad that they didn't call you for *XCOM 2*" (Tulio Campos, 2016). This comment addresses the player directly and conveys

emotions. This is parasocial interaction. Marbozir did not respond to this comment, but his status as a micro-celebrity in the Let's Play community still motivated the viewer to post this comment. The remaining comments were all socializing with other viewers. These comments made up interesting discussions and responses, such as "Great idea! But if you remain neutral, maybe you should also get bonuses after the war since your infrastructure remains intact et cetera, but also with other penalties like you said" (apemant, 2016). This comment originated from a thread in which the viewers were coming up with ideas for a new war themed video game. There were also comments with inside jokes about the game in the Let's Play, and comments that agreed that Marbozir was a better content creator than Quill, who is another Let's Play YouTuber. The comment section on this video truly acted as a social space that fosters community. Viewers were agreeing with one another and adding to each other's creative ideas. Without this type of community, this YouTube channel would not be so successful, indicating the importance of YouTube as a platform for Let's Plays and the gaming industry.

Most of the comments analyzed from Clare Siobhan's (2016) Let's Play Video were placed in the 'Socializing with other viewers' subcategory. These comments included jokes and experiences with the original *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* game, such as "Why even try to get to level 500, LMAO. I usually get to level 80, and then I get bored and restart it" (Monyca, 2018). These types of comments foster community and discussion around video games that is crucial to the industry. One comment tried to socialize with the player, namely "LOL, you react to the music just like I do! I love it! I sit and listen to that introduction music for a while before I can make myself leave it and start the game! I feel like *Skyrim* is my home away from home. It's very real to me!" (Shirley Curry, 2017). This comment portrays parasocial interaction. The author of the comments addresses the player and relates to her in a way one would relate to a friend. Clare Siobhan's present a self-image through self-mediation that is very likeable and relatable, resulting in a micro-celebrity status. Other comments discuss the player. Some discussed the player's skills, saying "Says 'I've spent a good number of hours on this game', gets surprised by the wolves attacking her near Riverwood" (Captain Baddboy, 2017). This comment is critiquing the player for 'pretending' to know the game well and not expecting a classic recurring problem within the game. The remaining comments discuss the personal life of the player, specifically her looks. Face recordings were included in this Let's Play video, making it possible for the audiences to interpret meaning from the player's facial expression as well besides their spoken commentary. However, the comments on Clare Siobhan's video solely discuss her looks, saying "She's so pretty" (Aydan Chapa,

2018) for example. This curiousness towards the player is can also be explained by the status of micro-celebrity in an attention economy.

The majority of the comments analyzed from OfficialStuffPlus' (2017) video were categorized in the 'Socializing with other viewers' subcategory. Most of these comments exists out of insides jokes that outsiders would not understand and discussions on experiences with alpha (unfinished) games, such as "I love these super early alphas, then seeing how the game grows. It happened with KSP, Software Inc, TABS, Rimworld, Minecraft. It's just awesome" (Omar, 2017). The inside jokes and experience sharing regarding alpha games point towards a very tight knit community that understand one another. The early access aspect is being appreciated as well, pointing towards acceptance of the commercial role of early access Let's Plays. Moving on, some comments discuss the game itself, comparing it to other games especially, such as "At a glance it looks quite similar to Big Pharma" (Sianistic, 2017). The authors of these comments were curious of what the game looks like and engaged with the paratext of Let's Plays in order to gain gaming capital. Lastly, one sole comment discussed the player skills by pointing out a better technique for the game, saying "Couldn't you just put two paint machines in parallel to paint twice the amount of cars in the same amount of time?" (Sean MacIntosh, 2017). This viewer outsmarted the player by finding a better solution, and by pointing it out he can be linked back to The Assistant persona. This type of audience enjoys figuring out solutions that the player could not, leading to feelings of mastery.

All comments analyzed from ChristopherOdd's (2016) video were placed in the subcategory 'Socializing with others'. The comments included inside jokes, such as "Ryan. He better always, ALWAYS be in a squad with Roll Fizzlebeef" (jpc1918, 2016). Furthermore, creative ideas for characters for the game from the Let's Play were shared, and support was expressed for the creative ideas that were enjoyed the most. There is an undeniable presence of community, which can only exist on platforms such as YouTube. These community interactions keep the YouTube channel alive.

Most of the comments analyzed from theRadBrad's (2017) video were categorized in the 'Socializing with other viewers' subcategory. These comments included jokes and discussions about the portrayal of Egyptian people in the game, such as "Are Egyptians really this dark?" (dajk jk, 2017), which led to a long thread. One comment discussed the game itself, wondering about the voice actors in the game, asking "Is that Chadwick Boseman as the voice actor, the guy who plays Black Panther in the Marvel movies?" (Irvin Reyes, 2017). Another comment discusses buying the game, stating "Really excited to play this game, I am

from Egypt” (Mohanad Amr, 2017). In this case, the Let’s Play could have been used as a tool to make buying decisions. The game in this Let’s Play video takes place in Egypt, exciting a viewer from Egypt into wanting to buy and play the game himself. The commercial role of early access Let’s Plays are accepted in this sense. Moving on, one comment discusses theRadBrad’s skills, which states “His skill is atrocious at the games he shows, but he has a talent for making people go out and buy the games he has footage of. If only for the viewer to do it right” (Padpaw22, 2017). Lastly, comments also stated negative feedback on the audio quality as theRadBrad talks rather loud. For example, “As much as I love Brad and his videos, this has bothered me for so long... He needs to level his volume settings” (Mujtaba Ibrahim, 2017).

The majority of the comments analyzed from EnterElysium’s (2018) video were placed in the subcategory ‘Socializing with other viewers’. Besides some jokes, the comments were discussing the situation that takes place in the game, translating it to real life and pointing out errors, such as “Radiation is an incredibly inefficient method of heat transfer. The chemical engineer inside me is screaming for some steam pipes to heat those houses“ (Ca Ad, 2018). These discussions lead to meaning making and understanding, which is an important factor that platforms such as YouTube can provide. One comment tries to socialize with the player, saying “EnterElysium, I’ve been following this game since you and Quill did a trial months back, can't wait for the new episodes. Don't forget to make those kids work for their food” (Ashley.G Reeves, 2018). This is another example of parasocial interaction. The remaining comments discuss the game itself, stating for example “I’m probably most interested in finding out what happened to freeze the world like this. South being colder tells me axial shift. In other playthroughs I’ve seen supervulcanos, disruptions in atmospheric circulation and the sun simply dimming being mentioned. God either hates these people, or something absolutely calamitous happened” (Skirlasvoud, 2018).

Most of the comments analyzed from BestInSlot’s (2016) video were categorized in the ‘Discussing the player’s skills’ subcategory. Most of them show annoyance towards the player for not understanding the in-game cues, for example “What irritates me is that the game gives you visual ques for pregnancy, genders, function of nests, et cetera, and I think BestInSlot just acts like an idiot to get more views through cringe comedy” (Unpronounceable, 2016). Whilst these comments do point out the players mistakes, there is more annoyance prevalent than satisfaction from feelings of mastery. Other comments were placed in the ‘Socializing with other viewers’ category. These comments include regular chit chat amongst the viewers, such as “Classic BestInSlot” (Armin Reindl, 2016). Interestingly, the game

developer left a comment in the comment section as well, saying that they would take the critiques into consideration when reworking the game. This shows how influential the platform can be for both Let's Players and game developers. Some viewers shared their opinions of the game, stating "The game seemed a bit too fast to me. This my personal opinion but I think it would be better if you got to spend more time with a 'character' and get attached to him so passing his genes would be more than just rushing to mate him with anyone just to not get a 'game over'. Also, it feels really stressful. Good luck with this game though, I think it's a great concept" (chris chris, 2017). The authors of these comments were interested in acquiring gaming capital through the Let's Play. Lastly, one comment discussed buying the game, as it said "I want to preorder the key, but I can't find where to order it anywhere. I want it NOW, please" (Monster Ball, 2016).

Almost all of the comments analyzed from PewDiePie's (2016) video were placed in the subcategory 'Socializing with other viewers'. These comments mainly existed out of jokes and funny discussions about the video, such as "I waited six years to play this... And now I'm going to wait six more to finish it" (kamelhamel24, 2017). This comment was a jab at the fact that PewDiePie waited six years for the release of a game only to never play it again. Remaining comments were trying to socialize with the player, saying "Alright, PewDiePie, I have waited 6 years for part 2 and it is still not here" (Zach Borchert, 2017). The author of this comment has a parasocial relationship with PewDiePie, in which PewDiePie is a micro-celebrity and the viewer treats him like a friend that can be demanding.

The majority of the comments analyzed from GameRiot's (2018) video were categorized into the 'Socializing with other viewers' subcategory. They mostly consist out of chit chat and small arguments, such as "Well, I don't see you making any games" (Cyborg Zombie, 2018) in defense of the game in the video. However, the remaining comments discuss the game itself. There were many aspects of the game that the viewers were not pleased with, such as the graphics, the cut scenes, and the co-op gameplay. One comment read "A *Way Out* requires a friend to be playable? This game is going to sell poorly..." (SirCreepsAlott, 2018). These viewers came to acquire knowledge on a new game and gained gaming capital.

From the results, it is clear that a big part of the viewers of early access Let's Play were curious about the game. Most of this interest in gaining knowledge was directed at the game instead of at the player and his universe. Let's Plays are not considered to be manuals however (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014). The informational purpose of Let's Plays is still informal, as viewers are curious to learn more about the game through the experience of

another (Smith et al., 2013). They do not seek a step-by-step play through of the game, but rather seek information that will tell them more about the game itself and help with their purchasing decision (Kaytoue et al., 2013; Meija, 2013). This is especially the case for early access Let's Plays, in which an insight is given of the game before its release. Viewers want to gain knowledge about the game and use early access content to do so. This is line with Consalvo (2007), who states that Let's Plays are game paratexts. Gamers gain knowledge through the social spaces of these paratexts. Let's Plays are also a metagame, which is a game outside of a game. Through metagaming and through the social space of paratexts, gamers can acquire gaming capital.

User generated content can change one's perception about a topic or product (Kim & Sun, 2006; Lee & Jang, 2010). According the previous literature, Let's Plays can influence the audience as well, and it can serve as a tool in the game community to make a final decision on whether or not to buy a game (Kaytoue et al., 2013; Meija, 2013). However, only a couple of the analyzed comments portrayed inspiration to buy a game after having watched the early access Let's Play. This absence of purchasing interest means that the commercial role of early access Let's Play is not viewed as a decision-making tool, but rather as a knowledge gaining tool.

Comments would not always assist the player with the gameplay, but they would often point out mistakes. The comments that pointed out mistakes showed signs of frustration and annoyance. According to Juul (2013), regardless of the frustration, the viewer would still have feelings of mastery which makes the failure fun. This is because the player's failure leads to enjoyment as it allows the viewer to apply their own skills to the gameplay. Nonetheless, the focus on skills is interesting. Though Let's Players' might try to show off their skills, success of a Let's Play video is not based on the player's skills (Smith et al., 2013).

In the attention economy, Let's Players need to create a unique public image that stand out in order to produce more clicks and hits (Marwick, 2015). After all, this is what creates the value of the Let's Player in the gaming industry and makes them attractive for collaborations with game companies (Khamis et al., 2017). Through self-mediation, which in this case is through the medium of Let's Plays on YouTube, the Let's Players portray likable personalities and are constantly self-branding to create a public image (Marwick, 2015). This is turn consumed by their subscribers, which is viewed as their fan base (Senft, 2008). By maintaining an audience, the Let's Players become micro-celebrities. As their personalities are likable and relatable, the audience can have parasocial relationships with the players (Khamis et al, 2017). This includes interactions in which the viewers address the player as

their friend, but the conversation and relationship is not returned directly. However, according to the results found, only a small number of comments were curious about the player. Whilst some tried to address the player directly, these parasocial interactions were not very common in the comment section. The audience was more curious about the game than about the player when engaging in the game paratext of Let's Plays. Additionally, most of the comments from viewers were directed at other viewers instead of to the player.

The social community that is fostered in the Let's Play environment is very prevalent. Many comments seek out socialization or discussion on games, Let's Plays, or the gaming industry. Therefore, the results are in line with the idea that conversation is the main activity in virtual communities (Oldenburg, 1997; Rheingold, 1993). This third place has regular visitors, which explains the inside jokes and mutual interests that were discussed in the comments that were analyzed. Regular visits keep the knowledge of the gaming community up to date, reinforcing gaming capital that in turn strengthens a sense of community. The feeling of community and membership motivates future participation, supporting the existence of the community (Hamilton et al., 2014).

From a political economical point of view, this type of community and socialization helps keep the Let's Play channels stay alive. This is important for both the gamers and the Let's Players. Without the regular visitors and conversations that happen in the virtual space of Let's Plays, the genre would lose its *raison d'être*. Let's Plays are supposed to portray insights and create discussions, as they provide a preview of what is to come from the gaming industry. With the resulting despair of Let's Plays, the unique type of community and discussions that can be found in the comments section of the videos will diminish as well. YouTube is an important platform that fosters these types of content and community. Let's Plays are dependent on the platform and users, and they are governed by the gaming industry. They are dependent on the industry's products and collaboration. In order to stay relevant and keep their audience's attention, Let's Players want to play the newest games to gain gaming capital and share it with their subscribers, so they can work along with the community in keeping the genre alive and healthy. The gaming industry has always been dependent on platforms, and they can adapt to them easily due how reworkable their software is (Poell et al., 2017). By making use of the YouTube platform, gaming industries can reach wide audiences that exist outside of social communities. Engaging with such audiences would mean creating conversations about games that can influence the gaming industry's direction. For example, early access content on video sharing platforms allow the ability for user feedback from viewers of the Let's Play before the release of a game. This enables developers to

rework the game before its release. In turn, it also makes the game industry more dependent on platforms and the user feedback.

Despite the dependence of Let's Plays on the gaming industry, the comments analyzed did not portray any major concerns with the commercial role of early access Let's Plays. However, viewers did get annoyed when they feel like they were being lied to, for example when a Let's Player pretended to be playing a game even when the content was pre-recorded. When it comes to sponsored content, viewers still expect honesty from the Let's Player, and they scrutinize content that seems dishonest. Nonetheless, instead of criticizing early access content, the audience seemed to enjoy it. It provides knowledge and insight that they can use to define games and themselves as gamers. The viewers do not interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Plays as advertisement per se, but rather as a helpful tool in game paratexts that can help with decision making and knowledge gaining. Acquiring gaming capital helps gamers understand themselves and games better, and early access Let's Play provide a social space for gamers to create mutual understandings, leading to feelings of community. The conversations that ensue help the community and the Let's Play genre survive, keeping the information relevant and new, and attracting new audiences and companies.

4.3. Summary

A big part of the analyzed comments of early access Let's Play were curious about the game and the platform serves as a metagame that allows gamers to gain knowledge about games, which is valuable information for their gaming capital. There was an absence of purchasing interest in the analyzed comments. That means that the commercial role of early access Let's Play is not viewed as a decision-making tool, but rather as a knowledge gaining tool. Comments portrayed frustration with the player's lack of skill as they pointed out the mistakes they made during gameplay, this leads to feelings of mastery as they can make use of their own skills during spectatorship. Furthermore, regardless of the importance of the attention economy and self-branding in the Let's Play genre, the comments analyzed showed more interest in learning about the game than in engaging in parasocial relations with the players, who are micro-celebrities on the platform. On the other hand, interaction between the viewers in the comment section is very prevalent, portraying a social community that is supported by conversation and regular visitors. In general, the viewers interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Plays as helpful game paratexts that provide knowledge and insight that they can use to define games and themselves as gamers.

5. Conclusion

Gaming channels on YouTube that create Let's Play video content have become extremely popular over the last years. However, despite its rising popularity, studies on how the audience interpret early access Let's Play content are lacking, due to the topic being quite new. Furthermore, the negative connotations with early access Let's Plays make this topic even more interesting, as it could damage the potential of Let's Plays as a marketing tool. There is a concern for bias from the Let's Players that might influence the audience. However, the commercial aspect of early access Let's Plays is often obvious to the viewers, which helps them take this in consideration when making meaning of the Let's Play content. This makes early access Let's Play videos a very interesting subject to study with the help of the audience's interactions in the comments. That is why this thesis set out to answer the question of how viewers make sense of the commercial role of early access Let's Play videos on YouTube. In the case of the ten videos that made up the sample, all game content displayed in the Let's Plays were provided by the game developers for marketing reasons. This is an example of how companies encourage Let's Plays (Meija, 2013). By providing early access to gameplay, Let's Players can provide a preview to their audience. The viewers will be able to experience a new game through another player's experience.

Most of the comments that were analyzed portrayed to be curious in the game. These viewers wanted to know more about the game and learn from the Let's Play video. The early access aspect allowed viewers to gain knowledge about what is new in the industry. This helps them stay up-to-date with their game capital, and creates new meaning of what a good game is and who gamers are (Consalvo, 2007). This meaning-making happens collectively amongst gamers, in this case taking place in the comment section of an early access Let's Play video on YouTube. Besides using the content as a tool for gaining knowledge, viewers can also use early access Let's Play as a tool for making purchasing decisions (Kaytoue et al., 2013; Meija, 2013). However, the results indicate that the latter takes place more often than the former, with only a handful of comments indicating their opinions on buying the game. On the other hand, some of the results indicated that viewers are simply spectating for entertainment. Comments were made on the Let's Players skills, often including frustrated phrases. By pointing out the mistakes and offering solutions the failure of the player is fun to the viewers, as it allows for the player to apply their own skills to the game that they are spectating (Juul, 2013). Besides the player's skills, the viewers did not portray much interest in the Let's Player in their comments. This is interesting, as Let's Players depend on the

attention of others, both viewers and companies, in order to maintain an audience and self-image. The attention economy dictates that a unique and positive public image is important to stand out and generate more hits and clicks on media content. The self-mediation of Let's Players helps them with self-branding and creating a personality that will be liked by the public, turning them into micro-celebrities. Fans form parasocial relationships with these micro-celebrities, in which they address them like friends but receive no direct response back. Surprisingly, the results did not find many comments that presented parasocial interaction. Rather, the viewers socialized more with one another. Many articles consider Let's Plays to be a social environment. Burwell and Miller (2016) state that Let's Plays function as a production site for social relations, and Radde-Antweiler et al. (2014) view Let's Plays as an environment of the game community, called a gameenvironment. Both claim that both players and viewers can discuss their opinions, experiences and interpretations of video games through engagement on Let's Play videos, fostering the social community. Whilst the viewers cannot interact with the actual game, they can interact with one another in the social space of paratexts (Burwell & Miller, 2016; Consalvo, 2007). This is how they gain knowledge not only about games but also about themselves (Consalvo, 2007). They are able to reflect on the game and the gameplay by connecting the acts within the game with real life, creating meanings (Burwell & Miller, 2016). A collective practice of meaning-making exists from the multiple different opinions and views that are shared. Oldenburg's (1997) third place framework has been applied to virtual communities by Rheingold (1993) and states that conversation is key. The results found tight social communities presented in the comment section, existing out of regular visitors with mutual interests and inside jokes. The regular visits help viewers keep their knowledge up to date, strengthening gaming capital that in turn supports a sense of community (Hamilton et al., 2014). This type of community and socialization helps keep the Let's Play channels stay alive. Let's Plays are dependent on the platform and users, and they are also governed by the gaming industry, whilst the gaming industry has always been dependent on platforms and user feedback (Poell et al., 2017). By making use of the YouTube platform, gaming industries can reach wider audiences, creating conversation and discussions that are crucial to keeping the community, genre and industry healthy. Comments provided almost no scrutiny of the promotional aspect of the early access Let's Play videos. Instead, early access preview of games has been portrayed as providers of knowledge and insight that they can use to make meanings and definitions within the social communities. The viewers interpret the commercial aspect of early access Let's Plays as a helpful tool in game paratexts that can help with decision making and knowledge gaining.

From the abovementioned results, it can be concluded a large part of the viewers value early access Let's Plays on YouTube for the social space that it provides to start discussions and share meanings. Furthermore, many viewers consider early access Let's Plays to be good tools for gaining knowledge, whilst only a handful of viewers actually use the content to make purchasing decisions. The social community that can be found in the social space of this game paratext can lead to collective practices of meaning making and gaining knowledge. This enhances the gaming capital of the viewers, which defines who they are as gamers, and in turn the feelings of belonging and community strengthens. The answer to the research question 'How do audiences of early access Let's Plays on YouTube interpret the commercial role of the videos?' is that audiences interpret the commercial role of early access Let's Plays as helpful tools to socialize and gain knowledge with. Early access provides a glance of what is new and what is yet to come, and this enhances the viewer's understanding of games. Instead of fearing biases from the Let's Player, viewers appreciate the commercial role of preview content for providing early insights that they otherwise would have had to wait for.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

It is unclear how the top five comments that were collected achieved this position in the comment section. Multiple factors come into play in the ranking algorithm of YouTube comments, such as the date, number of likes and number of replies. However, this was not always consistent. Some older comments with no likes or replies could be found at the top of the comment section, whilst some new comments with many likes and replies were found several comments below the top five. It has been speculated that the author of the comments influences the ranking as well, as mentioned before in this thesis. Still, much will remain unclear until YouTube publishes the ranking algorithm used for comments.

Furthermore, meanings are created and shared through discourses, but in order to understand these one must consider both what is explicitly stated and what is implicitly stated (Fairclough, 2003). Whilst discourse analysis sets out to do exactly this, one must consider the implications with online discourse analysis. Natively digital objects such as 'like' and 'dislike' are difficult to translate to real life, as mentioned before. Comments that are left online are hard to decipher due to their natively digital nature. It is difficult to understand whether the discourses behind the message mean the same in real life as it does online. Therefore, discourse analysis in an online social community is not easy and provided some difficulties.

Initial proposals of this thesis indicated the desire to work with a game developer to

further investigate the market effect of early access Let's Plays. However, this plan was abandoned due to both time restraints and lack of contacts. Future research might benefit from cooperation from game developers regarding similar topics, in order to gain a wider perspective and more insight into the market effect of Let's Plays.

Whether or not viewers perceive the commercial role of early access Let's Plays to be problematic can be argued upon. The results of this thesis found little concern amongst the comments regarding biased opinions in early access Let's Plays. Still, it is possible that these concerns are simply not being voiced in the comment section. Perhaps a different online forum is more suited for this type of discussion. Hence, more research into the public's opinion on early access Let's Plays could clear up the notions of possible concern amongst viewers, which could be done on different online game community forums or with focus groups.

In addition, previous research states that not only content such as Let's Plays but also the comments on it can influence the audience's opinions (Khan, 2016). This study did not look into the influence of comments on Let's Plays on the audience's perception of the game. This could be an important addition if studied in the future, as YouTube comments are often read by viewers (Schultes et al., 2013). More than half read the first two or three comments, which could be problematic as it is important to note YouTube's ranking of comments. The most liked comments and pinned comments are 'bumped' to the top of the comment section. Pinned comments are bumped up by the creator of the video, and upvoted comments and bumped up by other viewers who agree with a statement made. This means that the viewers who read the first couple of comments are all exposed to the same comments, perpetuating a bias. Especially pinned comments might include biased statements and opinions that are in favor of the creator of the video. More research is needed on how viewers read comments and how they perceive top comments in order to understand their influence on opinions.

Additionally, feelings of community and belonging are said to motivate future participation (Hamilton et al., 2014). Whether or not the discussion that exist within the social space of Let's Plays foster motivation for future participation has not been studied in this thesis. Recurring participation in engagement in the comment sections under Let's Plays on YouTube should be studied in order to come to a better conclusion regarding this statement. It is also not clear from this study whether the same viewer might interpret early access Let's Plays differently at different moments in time. Research on recurring participation might also provide an insight into this.

Let's Players also participate in the social community (Burwell & Miller, 2016).

However, they do not simply contribute to the comment section. The spoken commentary and facial reactions that they provide during their Let's Play portray their knowledge, opinions and feelings. This adds to the meanings that viewers can make from the content. This thesis did not study the Let's Plays content and the player's expressions. In order to understand how Let's Players themselves make meaning in their content and contribute to the social community, more research is needed. This could be an interesting addition to the current study.

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Appendix A – Coding Frame

Categories	Subcategories	Exemplary quotes
Discussing the game	Discussing the game itself	“A <i>Way Out</i> requires a friend to be playable? This game is going to sell poorly...”
	Discussing buying the game	“Really excited to play this game, I am from Egypt” (Mohanad Amr, 2017).
Discussing the player	Discussing the player’s skills	“‘I don't know the password’, while the password is displayed on the screen. People like you are the reason games keep getting dumber and dumber” (Alex Nil, 2017).
	Discussing the player’s personal life	“She's so pretty” (Aydan Chapa, 2018)
Socializing	Socializing with other viewers	“I think that’s actually a pretty neat idea. Though I don't agree that neutral states should be labeled cowards. Neutral states in WWI and WWII (or the Sevens Year's War - which some historians, including me, see as ‘a’ first World War) held a very important position for diplomacy, refugees and so forth. Talking about refugees: a concept I would really like to see implemented in the game is migration in general!” (ultraklebestift, 2016).
	Socializing with the player	“Damn, they called you. I remember being sad that they didn't call you for <i>XCOM 2</i> ” (Tulio Campos, 2016).
Miscellaneous	Positive feedback on quality	(Unused).
	Negative feedback on quality	“As much as I love Brad and his videos, this has bothered me for so long... He needs to level his volume settings” (Mujtaba Ibrahim, 2017).