

# **Not All Fun and Games: The Artistic Legitimation of Video Games**

A qualitative study into the legitimacy of video games by means of critics

Student Name: Anna Janssen

Student Number: 581814

Supervisor: Rian Koreman

Master Media Studies - Media & Creative Industries  
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2011, the National Endowment of Art has included video games in its definition (Cheyka, 2011) and The Game Awards have increasing viewership numbers (Takahashi, 2011), while Oscar viewer ratings have plummeted in the past several years (Stoll, 2021), indicating a rise of video games' popularity. Despite this, video games in general are not yet considered to be on the same level as film or literature, even though their essential elements are very similar, since they use both a visual medium as well as storytelling. Film reviews are very common in mainstream newspapers, while only some newspapers cover video games in a similar manner. Highly praised film critics like Roger Ebert even explicitly feel the need to mention that video games can never be art (2010). Additionally, there is often a big focus on why (violent) video games are unhealthy (Holstein, 2019). Why are video games so often generalised in the media, while those same media make a clear distinction between blockbuster films and arthouse films? How far along are video games in being taken seriously as an art form? In order to answer these questions, this research shows to what extent we can consider video games to be already artistically legitimated and therefore to what extent we can redefine the definition of art itself to include the medium.

Throughout history, popular media have been drastically overlooked as being an art form in comparison to media such as painting, music, or poetry. We already notice an inherent distinction in terminology like "popular art" and "high art". Popular art could, therefore, only be legitimised by being transformed into something other than popular art (Shusterman, 1993). However, the definition of art has a dynamic nature and is ever-changing. Film, for example, was previously considered to be merely a mass medium for consumption only, this being a characteristic of popular art. Nowadays, while we still assume a distinction between "artistic" films and "popular" films, the medium itself is being taken seriously as a form of art. For clarification purposes, in this research, I refer to the definition of art as "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects" (Merriam-Webster, 2011). This definition focuses on the aesthetic qualities of an artistic object, which is an important factor in this research.

According to many researchers of the arts (Baumann, 2001; Baldacchino, 2018; Shusterman, 1993; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010), criticism is a form of legitimation of art. By looking at art criticism, we take a look inside the development of particular media (Kuspit, 2014). Baumann (2001) researched the language being used in film reviews and its development over the years. Herein, he noticed an increasingly "artistic" use of language, like an increasing focus on complexity or suffixes like -esque, parallelling the development of film as an art form. This enabled him to list certain uses of language that indicate a high art stance towards a medium.

By considering video games as not being accepted as an art form and by considering critics' crucial role within the artistic legitimation of a medium, this research revolves specifically around the question *How do video game critics evaluate video games and to what extent do they legitimise video games as a form of art?*. A basis for answering this research question will be constructed through,

first, studying external factors that indicate artistic legitimization and placing video games within these factors. These external factors are selected mainly based on Baumann (2001, 2006), DiMaggio (1982, 1987, 1992), and Bordieu (1984), who studied other media and how these came to be more legitimated over time. Secondly, the importance of critics' role in the legitimization of media is explained in order to create a theoretical basis for this research. The particular language that indicates legitimization of a medium is discussed (Baumann, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010), to use these indicators for the research analysis.

The research question is answered by conducting interviews with professional video game critics. Professionalism of these video game critics is crucial, since they have been trained to look at video games in a certain way, but mostly because they possess authoritative qualities which ultimately influence how the public looks at video games. Just as Baumann (2001) states, when professionals start taking the medium more seriously, the public will start doing this as well, resulting in further legitimization of the medium. Using a qualitative method as opposed to Baumann's (2001) quantitative content analysis of film reviews will provide a more in-depth look into thought process behind critics' ideas.

Reconsidering video games to be a form of art can be beneficial to our society in many different ways. There is a certain economic value to it, where an awareness of the medium as a serious art form or more subsidisation of games can increase sales, increasing purchasing power. Artistic establishment of the video game industry resulting in an increasing demand for games would also mean more job opportunities in the field. A bigger demand for artistic games would mean that more consumers would become more involved with the arts in a manner that is unique to the medium: by being able to *play* the arts. With more awareness of games being a serious medium, more funds could become available for scientific research on the positive effects of video games on for example children or even on the elderly, such as benefits for eye hand coordination, alzheimers or other physical or mental illnesses (Coughlan et al., 2019). All in all, there is much to be gained from more research into video games and its status as a medium and as an art.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter is divided into two subchapters. The first is general legitimating factors, which discusses several factors that are theorised to be indicative of the artistic legitimization of a medium. The medium of video games is contextualised within these factors. The second chapter discusses the main subject of this research: critique and legitimation.

### **2.1. General Legitimizing Factors**

#### ***2.1.1. Legitimation of Art: A Theoretical Framework***

To determine what exactly makes art art is a challenge that many different scholars have attempted to address (Baumann, 2001; DiMaggio, 1982; Harrington et al., 2015). As demonstrated by DiMaggio (1992), while we now regard theater and drama as art forms, in the late 19th and early 20th century, they were forms of entertainment primarily reserved for “common people”. The same counts for, consecutively, the medium of film and the medium of television (Baumann, 2001). These media have formerly been regarded as common forms of entertainment and, since, have gained cultural and artistic status, meaning that “art” is an ever-changing concept and is not a closed-off set of media. But which conditions have transformed these media into legitimate art forms? Scholars have found multiple overlapping conditions and factors that have helped different media to gain legitimacy.

When observing the video game industry, based on previous theories surrounding artistic legitimization of other genres, I argue here that the medium is on the cusp of being widely accepted as an art form. Still, several protruding factors mentioned by theorists (DiMaggio, 1992; Baumann, 2001; Newman and Levine, 2012; Harrington et al., 2015) have not yet been fully researched with regard to video games and its industry.

In the following chapter, a basis is created for a general understanding of an existing dichotomy within video games, which is mostly determined by differences in both economic as well as aesthetic characteristics. Furthermore, two general legitimating factors are taken and applied to the medium of video games for a basis towards legitimization of the medium. The term ‘factor’ here is used to refer to certain conditions or characteristics that exemplify to what extent the medium is already legitimated in our society (Baumann, 2001, 2007; DiMaggio, 1982, 1992). Analogous to Baumann (2001), these factors are divided into two main categories. The first factor to be discussed is based on external events, like the support of high-status “patrons” as described by Baumann (2001). The second factor is rooted in internal changes within video gaming, such as institutionalisation.

After applying video gaming and its industry to these factors, a subject will be discussed that Baumann (2001) and other scholars (Harrington et al., 2015; Gemser et al., 2007; Chong, 2013) have touched upon, namely art legitimization in relation to criticism and reviews. I argue here that not enough research has yet been conducted on video games in relation to the subject and that, therefore, the main focus of this research will be on video game criticism.

### 2.1.2. A ‘Unity of Opposites’

The Heraclitean concept of the ‘unity of opposites’ proposes that the identity of a thing depends on coexistence with another, opposite, thing. For example, without colder things, we would not be able to classify other things as ‘hot’, as we would not have a contradiction as a comparison to define the term with. When discussing art, then, the existence of a term such as ‘high art’ suggests a simultaneous existence of a ‘low art’, and therefore one term cannot exist without the other. This existence of the term ‘low art’ inherently creates a status-based distinction between the two types of art (Wayne, 2012). In order to be able to legitimate video games as a medium, we then need to determine whether there is such a thing as ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ in games, and if so, what this distinction entails.

The Heraclitean approach to the dichotomy of terms like ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ is reflected in DiMaggio (1987, 1992) and explained as ‘classification’. This concept describes the production of distinctly defined boundaries between art, the conscious use of skill and creativity in order to create aesthetic objects, and entertainment, being driven by providing amusement for the consumer (Merriam-Webster, 2011). This creates a “definition of a high art that elites and segments of the middle class could appropriate as their own cultural property” (DiMaggio, 1982, p. 35), by claiming that art is reserved for the more intellectual public. The notion of genres creates division of cultural products into categories, and consists of socially constructed organisational principles that in turn give pieces of art a meaning that goes deeper than their thematic significance (DiMaggio, 1987).

A ‘unity of opposites’ is immediately found when searching for a definition of an indie game: “the term “indie game” is often used to define everything that’s not mainstream” (Oddo, 2021). In this context, ‘mainstream’ is referred to as AAA games. This classification reflects a big characteristic of the gaming industry, where indie and AAA are often separated into opposing categories. In general, indie games are less expensive, shorter, and more stylized, where AAA games use massive budgets, teams, long playing times, and less distinct styles. To make a clear comparison with existing established media, where AAA would be a blockbuster Hollywood film, indie would be arthouse. Defining this dichotomy further provides a basis for the data analysis section of this research, where the categorisation of ‘high art’ and popular art’ plays an important role, which will be further explained in the next subchapter. The dichotomy of indie versus AAA is based on two categories; economic elements and artistic or aesthetic elements.

**2.1.2.1. Economic Dichotomy.** The title AAA gaming is an unofficial term describing games created by mid-size or major publishers that have enormous production and marketing budgets, raising tens or even hundreds of millions of euros per game<sup>1</sup> (Vincente, 2020). Indie games, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Two of the biggest games of 2020, *Doom Eternal* (Martin & Stratton, 2020) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Kyogoku, 2020) have made respectively \$450 million and \$1.4 billion.

other hand, are mostly characterised as having been created by an independent developer or small development team and budget. An important nuance here is that indie games do not necessarily have small budgets, teams, and publishers, which can differ per game, making it even more difficult to define the term (Garcia, 2021). For example, *Minecraft* (Persson & Bergensten, 2011) started as an indie game, but has become extremely successful and, since, the rights have been sold to Microsoft (Burns, 2021). These types of indie games that have been picked up by major publishers are often unofficially called triple-I games (Lemne, 2016).

Another characteristic of economic dichotomy in games is the pricing of products. The pricing of games is a notable difference from other theories around art legitimization (Baumann, 2001; DiMaggio, 1992). Namely, both state that one of the reasons for legitimization of a medium is a higher price for the ‘artistic’ medium and a lower price for the ‘popular’ medium. For example, in theater, exclusivity for the higher class was created by implementing higher prices for ‘higher’ theater or opera shows, encouraging class differences (DiMaggio, 1982). In video gaming, however, it is notable that AAA games, the ‘popular art’ of the two, are much more expensive than indie titles. The average price for an AAA title is €60, while indie titles cost €8 on average (Brightman, 2017). This is most likely because there are more production costs, bigger crews, and better and more expensive technology in AAA games, therefore creating a higher asking price (Lowry, 2017).

Furthermore, while AAA developers might have access to more financial or technological assets than indie developers, the latter are allowed more creative freedom, are able to take more risks, focus more on innovation, and are able to aim their attention more at artistic sides of gaming, through a purposeful transgression from the mainstream (Latorre, 2016). However, while artistic innovation is theorised to be mostly present in indie or small-budget areas of a genre (Jahn-Sudmann, 2008), technical innovation mainly occurs in the AAA gaming industry. This has quite a simple explanation; video gaming technology is extremely costly. Therefore, indie developers often focus on innovative gameplay mechanics as opposed to innovative graphics, since these are extremely expensive. A result of this is that a big percentage of indie games that use innovative gameplay also use pixelated 8-bit or 16-bit graphics (Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016); it is less costly and the game can run on more devices. Better graphics and a smoother gaming experience simply works better on expensive hardware like gaming PCs or consoles, where an indie game can be more accessible since it is often also playable on a ‘basic’ laptop.

As opposed to technical innovation, indie gaming has more potential for artistic innovation. The ability to focus more on the artistic side of gaming is due to AAA publishers and developers mainly being focused on selling as many games to as many people as possible, resulting in AAA publishers being typically risk-averse (Brightman, 2015). Herefore, the classification of indie games versus AAA games based on social and financial goal differences creates a direct opposition between the two within the industry.



**2.1.2.2. Aesthetic Dichotomy.** It is mainly argued that a medium or subgenre of a medium is more legitimately ‘artistic’ when there is a focus on the visual, on the aesthetic (DiMaggio, 1982; Baumann, 2001) rather than function of the product. This means that there is a preference of ‘form over function’ within aesthetics.

In the film industry, for example, arthouse film is often purposefully anti-conventional, meaning that they deviate from the standardised narratives and aesthetics of Hollywood (Jahn-Sudmann, 2008). Arthouse titles are very distinguishable from a blockbuster in both aesthetics and experience, in that they possess distinct uses of colour, lighting, style, and cinematography which distinguishes them from the mainstream (Prinz, 2010). By choosing to diverge from standardised film conventions, aesthetic risks that are outside the mainstream are mostly saved for arthouse (Jahn-Sudmann, 2008). While the definition of an ‘indie’ game is mostly based on their ‘independence’ from big publishers and developers, Jahn-Sudmann (2008) argues that its aesthetic distinction from AAA titles and therefore its anti-establishment point-of-view is a very important additional factor in the labeling of a game as being ‘indie’.

An AAA title, like a blockbuster film, must be, if we go along with Bordieu (1984), not “too artistic”. As aforementioned, technological and financial aspects have a big role here. AAA games have big budgets and must appeal to big audiences, therefore often resort to “high fidelity, realistic graphics” (Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016). Indie developers must, because of scarce resources, revert to more creative means, most often resulting in highly stylised graphics by means of pixelated or hand-drawn styles (Latorre, 2016). In addition, through freely accessible video game making tools online, anyone can essentially create a video game. In order to stand out among the many people creating indie games, a distinguishable and well thought-out aesthetic is needed to make it unique among competitors (Stanley, 2020). Thus, not only is a distinct aesthetic in indie games a way to stand out and be anti-conventional, but distinct aesthetic choices are also made out of necessity.

### **2.1.3. External Events**

Now that the dichotomy within the video game industry is defined, legitimating factors of art can be explained and applied to the industry through looking at external and internal events. When using ‘external events’, I refer to conditions outside the industry itself that have influence on the artistic legitimation of a medium. Three main external events are discussed: education levels of consumers, high-status involvement, and competition. Internal events are defined by the idea that the industry itself influences conditions outside the industry.

**2.1.3.1. Education Levels of Consumers.** The socioeconomic status of media consumers strongly influences the legitimation or artistic status of a medium. This has been supported in studies regarding several types of media; television (Newman & Levine, 2012), film (Baumann, 2001), and theater and opera (DiMaggio, 1982, 1992). Baumann (2001) states that a higher class audience of a

medium can imply the institutionalisation of that medium. He claims that this correlation is due to the association of art forms with a higher socioeconomic status of audience members. Concutively, he found that increased education levels correlated with audiences being more inclined to appreciate film as art. Therefore, it is useful to look at education levels of video game consumers to see whether there is a chance that consumers are inclined to appreciate games as art.

Baumann mentions that “In the early decades of commercial film’s enormous popularity, film-going was primarily a working-class activity” (2001, p. 408), whereas education levels of gamers are relatively high in comparison to film audiences in its early days. This implies a higher-class audience is already established in video games, possibly moving video games in the direction of artistic legitimization faster. Video game purchases by income group do not differ much, although there is a slightly negative correlation in video gaming and income group (Morris, 2020). People with high school diplomas are most likely to make video game purchases, and people with associate and bachelor’s degrees follow in second and third place. The percentage of college educated gamers is 52% (ESA, 2019). Morris’ (2020) report also states that there is a slight decline in gaming based on education level, income level, or years since graduation, but that this is most likely to be related to the age of players and not to social class. Naturally, we cannot make predictions about the future and therefore cannot know for certain if people that have grown up with video games as a mainstream form of entertainment will keep playing video games or not. Nonetheless, we have evidence that allows us to say that people with higher education levels play video games just as much as people from lower education and incomes. This might indicate a more artistic stance towards video games than, for example, the early days of film and theater, if we go along with Baumann (2001) and DiMaggio and Useem (1978).

**2.1.3.2. High-Status Involvement.** A second external factor that helps a medium gain legitimacy is the involvement of high-status patrons (Baumann, 2001, 2007; DiMaggio, 1992). This patronage can be brought forth in the form of, for example, public funding by governmental organisations or artistic institutions providing museum exhibitions (DiMaggio, 1982, 1992). Newman and Levine (2012) support this idea by claiming that the legitimization of television was only possible through cultural elites who invest in “the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return” (p. 7).

In the past decade, increasingly more publicly funded initiatives have been set up for digital gaming. The United States National Endowment for the Arts has issued new guidelines for funding and has made grants for digital games available (Lasar, 2011), with countries like the United Kingdom (Dowsett, 2020), The Netherlands (Dutch Game Garden, 2014) and Germany (Handrahan, 2020) that have followed. However, not just any game can be funded. In Germany, for instance, a game development project needs to be based on “innovative impulses, cultural relevance, economic

effects and available means” (Handrahan, 2020). This implies that there is, seemingly, such a thing as artistic video games based on certain characteristics. By cultural relevance, a game is meant to have a relevant message or an innovative approach. *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden & Pugh, 2011), for example, is a meta-commentary on the nature of choice as well as on the idea of free choice in video gaming itself. Economic effects can be understood as a game having a positive impact on the country’s economy by, for example, increasing the number of game releases from Germany and strengthening their position in the German and international markets (BMVI, 2020). Furthermore, Harrington et al. (2015) suggest that economic success can, over time, result in artistic legitimacy.

Another example of the involvement of high-status patrons in the video gaming industry is what I call high-status “participation”. This concept is not explicitly used by Baumann (2001), however, still has similar legitimating characteristics of involvement of an already established high-status elite contributing to the medium. I refer here to high-status film actors and directors who are increasingly participating in the production and (voice) acting in video games. This differs slightly from the aforementioned theorists’ point regarding patronage, as these actors and directors do not *sponsor* video games, but their high status within (arthouse) film contributes to a certain level of prestige for these particular games. Highly praised film stars like Gary Oldman, Mads Mikkelsen, Marlon Brando, and even legendary musician David Bowie have been involved in (voice) acting in video games. Additionally, several noted directors have (partly) directed video games as well, such as John Carpenter, Guillermo Del Toro, and Steven Spielberg. Because these are generally critically acclaimed actors and directors who participate in the creation of video games, this can indicate or convince the public that the medium has gained a certain higher status.

**2.1.3.3. Changing Opportunity Space.** Another external legitimating factor that Baumann (2001) focuses on is the concept of a changing opportunity space, meaning that the emergence of a new medium for the masses usually takes another medium to a higher artistic level. According to Bordieu (1993), this happens because a natural division between big scale and small scale productions occurs, where the latter produce cultural and symbolic capital aimed an elite audience that appreciates art. The former are directed at an audience as large as possible, producing mainly economic capital. Thus, Baumann argues that the emergence of television as a mass medium played a key role in film’s artistic legitimation, because it allowed the medium to be enjoyed by more elite audiences through it not being as readily available for the masses as television. This is analogous to what DiMaggio argued in *Cultivating Differences* (1992): film, prior to its artistic status, redirected mass audiences away from theater.

In applying this concept to the video game industry, I use the example of the emergence of mobile gaming. Technological innovations, like film cameras, film projectors, or the home television set have enabled the opportunity space to stealing away the masses (Baumann, 2001). Mobile games like the Snake genre or *Bounce* (Nokia, 2000) were available on mobile phones before, but especially

gained popularity and profit since the launch of the App Store in 2008. Thus, in a sense, the invention of smartphones strongly enabled a shift in gaming. Since then, mobile gaming has become one of the most popular and profitable types of gaming. It now has the biggest market share of the entire video gaming industry, with 48% of players playing mobile games (NewZoo, 2020). Additionally, according to DiMaggio, “Movies, offering entertainment for one-fifth the price of the legitimate stage, had captured the middle-income as well” (1992, p. 29). Therefore, the masses were also lured away from the theater with the simple ‘solution’ of cheaper entertainment. Mobile gaming is often free or only costs several euros, making it attractive to the masses. This is a significant difference from PC or console games, for which the average game is often between 10 and 60 euros (Brightman, 2017). Herefore, the combination of extremely cheap, most often even free, and extremely readily available entertainment creates an ideal option for the masses, creating opportunity space for PC and console gaming to be taken more seriously as a higher form of entertainment.

#### **2.1.4. Internal factors**

Internal factors are defined by the fact that those involved in video games made efforts to implement video games into other industries to increase its status in relation to other media. Baumann (2001) also calls this institutionalisation. Here, ties to education programmes and festivals and awards are discussed.

**2.1.4.1. Ties to Education Programmes.** The main claim of scholars in relation to the legitimization of a medium is that the implementation of the medium in academic studies places “artistic worth” on the object (Baumann, 2001), suggesting that further legitimization occurs when academic study programmes or subjects related to the medium are implemented in universities. Therefore, as Baumann (2001) refers to DiMaggio (1992), “As centers of cultural authority, universities helped redefine a range of cultural products as high art” (p. 410).

For one, university studies (Bachelor’s as well as Master’s) have already been developed for video game creation (FindAMasters, n.d.). Most of these studies are practice-oriented and are focused on the technical side of video game development. In recent years, social sciences have also implemented video game analysis in study programmes like film and media studies, like Utrecht University in The Netherlands having a Master’s degree in ‘Game and Media Technology’, and Tampere University in Finland having a Master’s programme in ‘Social Sciences in Game Studies’. The fact that not only practical, but more importantly analytical media studies implement video games is a development that only further legitimates the medium. This implies that there is symbolic cultural worth to be found in the medium, as it is studied in such a way as, for example, film is studied in university programmes.

**2.1.4.2. Festivals and Awards.** Festivals and award ceremonies can be an indicator for the artistic legitimization of a medium, because they are a celebration of the artistic potential of the medium in a public manner (Baumann, 2001). Film festivals are directed towards the more artistic arthouse type of film, and a blockbuster will not easily be shown during a festival. The films shown at festivals are selected by a group of experts, as well as the winners of film awards that are selected by juries. This creates “an atmosphere in which film as a genre could enjoy increased prestige” (Baumann, 2001, p. 409).

The closest resemblance to film festivals that the video game industry has is most likely video game conventions. These are usually two to three day long events that are open to the public, where the public can primarily play and discover new games. Gaming conventions, however, are difficult to compare to film festivals, since a big and popular part of these conventions revolve around trailers and new releases for AAA titles. It is notable here that E3, the biggest gaming convention and event of the year, also implements indie game categories. Since indie games have earlier been established as having more artistic potential, this means that more artistically oriented games also get attention during these conventions, not just the bestsellers of the industry. In 2021, for example, it was argued that the bigger titles of E3 were quite disappointing to the public, but that indie gaming really took the spotlight from AAA gaming (Hood, 2021).

Another celebration of the artistic potential of the medium is reflected in video game award shows and video game categories in conventionally prestigious award shows. First, there are many video game award shows purely intended to revolve around video games, indicating a change in media attention towards video games (Baumann, 2001). Secondly, and possibly most noteworthy, already existing high-status award shows have implemented video game categories. One example of this is the BAFTA awards, which have created a separate awards show for video games since 2004. In 2006, BAFTA informed the public of their decision to give an equal stage to games in comparison to film and television and video games are now also implemented in the ‘regular’ awards show. BAFTA is an independent charity that presents itself as promoting the art forms of the moving image, insinuating that, by implementing a video game category, some video games can, in fact, be considered art if we follow Baumann’s (2001) argumentation.

## **2.2. Critique and Legitimation**

### ***2.2.1. Criticism, Reviews, and Legitimation***

As has been demonstrated previously, different scholars have attempted to summarise overlapping factors that helped different types of media gain legitimacy. External conditions as well as internal conditions play a significant role in the process of medium legitimization. However, there needs to be a general social acceptance of the medium from the public as well. Media scholars suggest that this public general acceptance can partly be achieved through reviews and critics that discuss the

medium in a particular manner (Harrington et al., 2015; Baumann, 2001, 2007; DiMaggio, 1982, 1992).

In the following sections, critics' role in the artistic legitimization of media will be discussed and applied to the gaming industry. First, the 'why' is discussed; why do critics have this type of authority over the public? What impacts do reviews have on sales, but also on the public judgment of a medium? Secondly, the 'who' is explained; who is deemed a 'legitimate' critic? Who is considered as 'merely' a person judging a text? Third, the 'how' will be considered; how do critics decide what is 'good'? How can one tell whether critics see a subject as being artistic or not? How do critics judge popular as opposed to high art?

By answering these questions, I aspire to provide a substantial basis as to why critics play an important role in art legitimization, as well as why this subject has not been researched sufficiently with regard to the video gaming industry. This will provide a basis for the main research of this paper; examining in which manner video game critics discuss video games.

### ***2.2.2. Reviews and Their Impact***

To examine why looking at critics and reviews with regards to art legitimization is relevant in answering the research question, the subject is subdivided into two parts that reflect Harrington et al. (2015); economic legitimacy and artistic legitimacy. For the former, the concrete impact of reviews and positive or negative criticisms on consumerism and sales need to be examined. In contrast to Bordieu's (1984) claims, Harrington et al. (2015) suggest that economic viability can become the initial start of the legitimization of a medium. When a government or industry sees economic value in a certain product, it is possibly the first step of legitimization in a capitalist society. The medium is taken seriously as a profitable object first, after which more opportunity space emerges to look at the medium in a different and possibly more artistically valuable manner, meaning that legitimization occurs (Baumann, 2001). The phrasing 'possibly' is used here, because artistic legitimization after economic legitimization is not achieved in every case. Harrington et al. (2015), for example, eventually conclude their research with the finding that "soaps' economic success was never matched by a widespread acceptance of the genre's artistry" (p. 627). However, I try to argue here that video games have the potential to be legitimated through the role that critics play and in the manner in which these critics discuss video games.

To research why critics and reviews influence both economic impact and artistic legitimacy of a medium, I look at other studies that have researched this for other media. Both economic and artistic legitimacy impacts are then applied to the video game industry. This is done so in order to gain further insights into what has already been discovered regarding the influences of critics and reviews of video games.

**2.2.2.1. Economic Impact of Reviews and Critics.** Before elaborating on the subject, when discussing ‘expert’ reviews, I refer to the definition that Blank (2006) refers to as connoisseurial reviews. These are defined by “the dependence on the ability of a person - a reviewer - who, because of unusual talents, extensive experience, or special training, has developed a refined sensitivity with respect to a certain product or genre.” (Blank, 2006, p. 29). Connoisseurs are concerned with or especially skilled in examining wider cultural or social contexts in relation to the product.

We must first look at reviews and their impact in a general sense in order to determine what the economic legitimacy of reviews entails: to what extent do reviews influence purchasing behaviour? Typically, reviews certainly have an impact on consumer behaviour, especially positive reviews. Mo et al. (2015) have shown that positive reviews are a highly significant indicator and predictor of consuming behaviour. Another study, conducted by means of a survey with the consuming public, suggests that 82% of people will read reviews before making a purchase, and that they are willing to pay more for a product if they are promised a better experience with the product (Fullerton, 2017). Especially because progressively more purchases are being made online, without a consumer being able to inspect the product in a physical store, word-to-mouth practices like online reviews are becoming increasingly important in consumers’ decisions (Wyld, 2021).

When looking specifically at media consumerism and reviews of media texts, we also see that reviews have an economic impact. As specified by Wang and Guo (2016), a wide range of media are found to be influenced in sales numbers by positive reviews, such as literature (Sorensen & Rasmussen, 2004), television (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004), and film (Basuroy et al., 2003; Chakravarty et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2013). In their own research, Wang and Guo (2016) conclude that positive user reviews of filmgoers result in a higher number of audiences, suggesting that digital word-of-mouth activities are essential to success in media industries. Gemser and Van Oostrum (2007) provide nuance here, since they suggest there being a difference between arthouse moviegoers and mainstream moviegoers and the influence that reviews have on both types of audiences. Mainstream moviegoers are found to be influenced by reviews, but mainstream reviews primarily predict film demand at best. They conclude their research with the revelation that “Getting media coverage by means of film reviews, irrespective of their nature, seems ... to play a pivotal role in generating the consumers’ interest in art house movies” (Gemser & Van Oostrum, 2007, p. 57). They claim that this is because the arthouse film industry does not have the marketing budget and means to “sell” the film to the public in the same manner that mainstream film industries do.

When observing the economic effects of reviews on video games, similar results are found. As is the case with other media products, reviews certainly have an impact on video game sales (CS Agents, 2018; Joeckel, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011) as well as on consumers’ opinions on a game (Wilde, 2010). These sources confirm that positive reviews positively influence consumer behaviour in video games, especially prior to release (Joeckel, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011). However, it is

uncertain whether there is a significant difference between indie and AAA gaming in this sense, which has not been researched yet in a similar manner to Gemser and Van Oostrum's (2007) research.

**2.2.2.2. Artistic Legitimacy of Reviews and Critics.** Bordieu (1984) mentions that “the market is accepted more and more as a legitimate means of legitimation”. In his opinion and supposedly many others, the highest cultural products that humans have created (poetry, philosophy, literature) were all purposefully produced with an imperative to be against this market imperative (Bordieu, 1984, p. 27). Additionally, according to Bordieu, when critics act as cultural intermediaries, we need to look at cultural and artistic legitimacy and not at market imperatives, implying an anti-commercialism stance. This further entails a focus on the judgment of “form, manner, style, rather than the ‘subject’” (Bordieu, 1984, p. 4).

A general consensus among artistic consumers is needed in order for cultural and artistic legitimation to take place (Baumann, 2007). According to Baumann (2007), “the unaccepted is made accepted through consensus”, meaning that through a general consensus regarding a medium as being artistic, the medium becomes accepted and therefore legitimated<sup>2</sup>. The question is, then, how this consensus regarding a medium as being a legitimate form of art is achieved. As claimed by Zelditch (2001), consensus is achieved by justification of a cultural product's artistic values, and convincing arguments need to be made in order to achieve this justification. These ‘convincing arguments’ are argued to be reserved for professional critics and reviewers, who create a framework for symbolic cultural and artistic values, and who are judged to be connoisseurs of the medium they review (Baumann, 2001, 2007; Chong, 2013; Dewey, 2005; Harrington et al., 2015; Heikkilä & Gronow, 2017). By judging from a critical distance through their professionalism and expertise in artistic judgment, critics aim to “regulate the place of subjectivity” (Chong, 2013, p. 278) and therefore provide a critical opinion to be adopted by the public. Therefore, critics become an important player in the artistic legitimation and social consensus of their subject.

A research similar to Baumann's (2001) in the video game industry has unfortunately not been undertaken yet, making it difficult to set both industries side by side in the same fashion. In 2014, Adams argued that we do not even have artistic video game reviews yet. He explains that, while there are many amateur reviewers who discuss games by their aesthetic and gameplay aspects, this is not the same as art reviews according to him, because he claims there are no ‘real critics’. He claims there are no real game critics, because they are ‘poorly educated’ and do not discuss games as a wide reading: discussing the meaning of a game in a larger context. There is no exact vocabulary for intellectual video game discussion, and art reviews about video games are necessary for us to institutionalise games (Adams, 2014). While it is indeed the case that art reviews are still scarce

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<sup>2</sup> He does mention here that there cannot be absolute social acceptance from every person, “as there is never complete consensus within a society about anything” (Baumann, 2007, p. 49).



within the video games industry, since Adams' (2014) study, this has already changed to a certain extent. Slowly but steadily, video games are appearing in other media texts that are already established as intellectually valuable, such as newspapers. For example, major U.S. newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* also publish articles and reviews relating to the video game industry. Generally, newspapers like the above-mentioned make use of formal and intellectual language (Reah, 2002; Timuçin, 2010), adding more intellectual value to published pieces in these so-called 'broadsheet' newspapers. Dutch newspaper *NRC* publishes fully realised game reviews that philosophise about and analyse games on a deeper level than merely focusing on entertainment values. This implies that a more intellectual manner of discussing video games is making its way into the mainstream news sources. This in turn implies an artistic stance towards the medium, since intellect is linked to traditional high brow classification (DiMaggio, 1992).

### **2.2.3. Types of Reviewers: Who Can Legitimate?**

Previously, a distinction was created between different types of reviews by separating user reviews from expert reviews. This is an important difference, as professional reviews are generally argued to have a substantial legitimating effect (Baumann, 2001; Wang & Guo, 2016). Theoretically, as aforementioned, user reviews can certainly have an impact, but mostly economically.

User reviews help the public make a decision regarding what to watch, buy, or play, but do not have the same legitimating authority as professionals, as has been elaborated on in the previous sections. A division between the two can be found when observing their approach to writing reviews. Kozbelt and Serafin (2009) have found that, in art reviewing specifically, "Artists associated quality mostly with originality; nonartists mainly valued technical skill and realism." (p. 358). They further suggest that nonartists, unlike artist raters, do not focus on "meaningful underlying differences in the process of creation" when judging either high- or low-quality drawings. Kozbelt and Serafin's (2009) research then suggests that, with regards to *art*, there can certainly be a difference in judgment. Professional reviews as compared to amateur reviews are further theorised to be higher in word count and possess a focus on impartiality and "distancing themselves from the review on a personal level" (Andreasson, 2021), whereas amateurs mostly contain positive and emotional tones in their reviews. These characteristics can, according to Andreasson (2021) result in professionals becoming more strongly positioned as leaders and having an influence on the majority of the reader.

Similarly to other media industries, the video game industry makes use of both users and professionals to provide the public with reviews. Professionals in the video game industry usually write newspaper articles or articles for websites specifically dedicated to video games. As aforementioned, mainstream newspapers, like Dutch newspaper *NRC*, make use of professional game writers or journalists that dive into the industry on a deeper level. Specific video game websites do not necessarily push the medium into a general social consensus as much as newspapers do, simply because video game websites are visited by the niche that already shows interest in the medium.

Differences between user and expert reviews of video games in particular are found to be similar to the aforementioned discrepancies in Andreasson's (2021) study; experts use a more clinical and detached style that still reflects their own experience and tends to overall be more balanced, while amateurs use more emotionally charged language and more extreme ratings (Santos et al., 2019).

A big difference from other media types is that video reviewers and streaming have a central place in the video game industry. YouTube alone as a platform has over 665.000 streaming channels (Clement, 2021), by both amateurs and professionals. Using videos to review games is very fitting to the medium, since a video game is much longer than, for example, a film; many parts of the gameplay can be shown without spoiling any of the story. For instance, showing a side quest in a video review can inform the audience on what the game is like without simultaneously spoiling the main storyline. Furthermore, video games are, compared to television, music, or film, much more expensive, especially AAA titles. When a user is looking for a game to buy, it is important that they have a good sense of whether they will enjoy the game before buying it. Therefore, being able to see what the gameplay is like is extremely useful to the public in order to make the 'right' decision (Xu et al., 2015). Because of the big involvement of digitalisation and social media in the video game industry, essentially anyone can post a review online. This differs from game websites and newspapers, because these instances hire a writer based on certain skills. So how do we know which video reviews are professional? Once more, Blank's (2006) definition of connoisseurial reviews can be applied here; extensive knowledge, training, and refinement make the difference in terms of authority of judgment.

#### ***2.2.4. Language and Criteria in Reviews***

To determine whether there is a possibility for further legitimization of the medium of video games, we must first determine what it means when critics judge video games in an 'artistic manner'. We must look at what critics' criteria exactly are and when they are generally considered to deem a medium as 'artistic'. In order to determine this, it is important to make a distinction in criteria that are given to high art and to popular art, as these are supposedly judged differently (Baumann, 2001; Holbrook, 1999; Kersten & Bielby, 2012; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010). Specifically Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) are used here, since these authors have listed specific indicators of either a high or a popular aesthetic in a review. Further, I try to explore to what extent video game reviews already possess the qualities that Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) in order to determine whether there are any video game-specific indicators to be found as well.

**2.2.4.1. High versus Popular Art Aesthetics.** As specified by Bordieu (1984), in order for artistic legitimization to occur, there needs to be a certain 'aesthetic disposition' in which 'form' is valued over 'function', as well as a general validation and preference for 'distance from the facile', meaning that style, complexity, and uniqueness are highly appreciated in artistic judgments. Bordieu

explains this 'aesthetic disposition' further as being "understood as the aptitude for perceiving and deciphering specifically stylistic characteristics" (Bordieu, 1984, p. 50), meaning that a certain skill is required to be able to appreciate artistic characteristics of a medium. This is exactly what critics attempt to accomplish. As Bordieu (1984) already explains, there is a difference between the approach of popular and high art, popular art being the 'facile' that he mentions.

Popular arts are argued to be judged with lack of depth or a general opposition against high art criteria like originality and nuance (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010). The authors further claim that popular aesthetic emphasizes functionality, the user/consumer's experience with the medium, and emotional response. Further indicators of popular art according to these authors can be a focus on the functional uses of the subject, on the type of audience that will enjoy the subject, or descriptions "with reference to food related metaphors that emphasise 'primary' tastes" (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010, p. 406). Moreover, the focus lies on appreciating the more 'safe' options that are attractive to the biggest amount of people. In film, this seems to be directed towards films that are very accessible in terms of realism, accompanied by well-known box-office stars and conventional values (Holbrook, 1999). According to Holbrook (1999), the reason that popular appeal is gravitated towards this accessibility, is because these are familiar settings, meaning it is easily relatable to large audiences. Appealing to the largest audience possible correlates with earlier discussed ideas of a popular art being mainly focused on commercialism and economic success.

Holbrook (1999) further explains that experts are more inclined to judge something as qualitatively favourable when they challenge the above-mentioned popular art characteristics. This is also in line with the ideas posed earlier, when an aesthetic dichotomy between indie and AAA games was suggested. We can primarily see that complexity and focus on a broader context, whether it is other artworks or social contexts, are in the forefront of what the authors (Baumann, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010) consider a high art criterion. For example, deviations from 'standard' cinematography, values, relatable settings, and prioritisation of complexity in film is appreciated in this type of judgment (Holbrook, 1999), meaning that there is a prioritisation of going against popular art, again overlapping with earlier discussed claims by Prinz (2010). Furthermore, an emphasis on formal experimentation (Bordieu, 1984), auteurism (a focus on the director or creator of the product), and a meaningful viewing experience in the cultural/social sense (Kersten & Bielby, 2012) are much used as legitimating elements in media evaluations. Similar terms like originality, nuance/complexity, seriousness, and timelessness are aesthetic criteria according to Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) and Baumann (2001). Further indicators that the authors mention include usage of specific words that are deemed 'artistic' (words with 'art', genius, brilliant, work), mentioning of ambiguity, attempting to interpret the text in a certain manner, or mentioning the intelligence of the producer of the subject. We can see here that, yet again, a 'unity of opposites' can be used to explain the dichotomy between high and popular art, considering that the general criteria in aesthetic disposition are exemplified as being what popular art is not.

Although, as we have seen here, different scholars proposed a clear contrast between judgment criteria for high arts and for popular arts, Kersten and Bielby (2012) suggest that the basic criteria on which a text is judged are extremely similar. The authors conclude that reviews, both judged as being mere ‘economical’ as well as ‘artistically legitimating’, include four elements: auteurism (naming the director as the creative mind behind a film), experience (the emotional impact of watching a film), processes (“creative processes that went into making a film and the manner in which the storylines, characters, or look of the movie came about” (Kersten & Bielby, 2012, p. 194)), and context (naming of the context of a film within as well as outside the film industry). Their main conclusion is that, while both types of reviews include the same elements, the elements “are utilized to different degrees, depending on the kind of recognition a film ultimately receives.” (Kersten & Bielby, 2012, p. 196). Hence, a difference is still to be found.

Since, for this research, the goal is to discover how professional video game critics discuss video games, interviews with critics will later on be analysed with the abovementioned criteria and indicators at hand, in order to analyse to what extent a critic considers games to be art or have artistic potential.

**2.2.4.2. Video Games and Reviews.** Although much research has been conducted on other types of media and reviews in relation to high or popular art, like film (Baumann, 2001) or music (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010), comparatively little research has been done on video games regarding the same subject. Most research that can be found about video game reviews looks at the economic impact of video game reviews, while research about artistic legitimacy comparable to Baumann’s (2001) research is extremely scarce. One of the very few researches that hints towards this subject is Zagal et al. (2009), who conclude that video game reviews are, unlike most people apparently expect, “rich and varied in terms of the themes and topic they cover” (Zagal et al., 2009, p. 221). The authors here claim that video game reviews certainly play a broad role in the video games discourse and that they are underestimated in terms of how they help us develop and understand games and their history.

A type of research like Baumann’s (2001) or Van Venrooij and Schmutz’s (2010) is difficult to conduct for video game reviews just yet, because the medium is relatively young. This makes it more difficult to see changing trends over several decades, since there is simply less data to analyse. Baumann (2001), for example, conducted his research when cinema was already established as a high art, which we cannot establish yet for video games. As demonstrated in the current and previous chapter, there is still much ambiguity about video games as a high or a popular art, whereas Baumann (2001) and others (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010) conducted researches about the development of different media towards its art legitimization when they already had the general consensus of the public to actually state the medium’s artistic legitimacy. However, since we have specific characteristics and criteria to look out for in the research, this can be applied even though the medium is comparatively

young. Therefore, while no general consensus regarding video games' artistic legitimacy exists yet and while the medium is still much younger than other media in similar research, I nevertheless deem this research to be valuable in the field of media research by using the same evaluative criteria.

As we have seen here, it has become clear that critics certainly have the power to shift and represent the general consensus around a medium, specifically professional critics. Since the research goal here is to discover in which manner video games are already deemed to have artistic legitimacy or have the potential to become artistically legitimated, critics are a useful starting point to determining this. Seen that there is a basis for analysing critics' language in a legitimating context, and also acknowledging that there is much research still needed regarding the video games industry in a legitimating context, this research attempts to combine these factors and therewith solve some of the research that is still lacking. This is achieved by means of interviewing video game critics about their stance and view on video games today. By looking at the language they use, the opinions they have, and the subjects they discuss, a better view on the process of artistic legitimization in the video games industry is reached.

### 3. Methodology

In order to conclude how video game critics evaluate video games and to what extent they legitimise video games as a form of art, the qualitative method of interviews is used. This is not common in studies where critics' language use is studied to make conclusions about legitimisation of a medium (Baumann, 2001; Gemser & Van Oostrum, 2007; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010), which can be explained by the high number of reviews used in these studies. These specified authors used content analysis by applying statistical analysis to reviews. Statistical analyses like the ones used in Baumann's (2001) or Van Venrooij and Schmutz's (2010) studies can certainly be applied to video game reviews. However, they solely look at language use and not at the critic itself. More in-depth qualitative methods can help understand not only *whether* something is occurring, but additionally helps understand the *why* and *how* behind certain occurrences; why certain social changes occur, and to help us understand the contexts, changes, and thoughts behind occurrences (Mohajan, 2018). When researching qualitatively, underlying emotions and feelings of research subjects are taken into account to better understand the motivation or thought process behind a particular idea or trend (Ahmad et al., 2019). This coincides with the phenomenological approach of qualitative research; "to create a picture of the issue or phenomenon" through observing "the lived experience of individuals" (Bolderston, 2012, p. 67). This approach helps answer the research question based on interpretations, experiences, and meaning. Since definition of art is interpretative, personal, and dynamic, the use of qualitative methods adds subjective, in-depth, and complex layers to researching art criticism, enabling us to make sense of reality and explain the developments of the socio-cultural world (Guest et al., 2013). Therefore, I deem a qualitative method to be suitable here.

Since the goal is to collect information on critics' thoughts, experiences, and interpretations, interviews are a suitable qualitative method (Kvale, 1996). Interviews are a more personal form of research than, for example, questionnaires, because they enable the respondent to open up more and give personal responses (McNamara, 1999). This is due to the interviewer working directly and personally with the interviewee. In the case of this research, seeking personal views is exactly the goal, therefore interviews are a suitable manner of achieving the research goals. As opposed to conducting surveys, interviews do not confine the answers to a question to a set number of possible outcomes (McNamara, 1999). When looking for in-depth information, open-ended questions reveal more about someone's viewpoints than closed-ended questions. The opportunity for follow-up questions is also introduced when using open-ended questions, therefore interviews will have a semi-structured design. Additionally, interpretations or reasons behind phenomena that the interviewer did not think of can be revealed through open-ended questioning. A final advantage of interviews is that, while interviews focus on subjectivity and are qualitative, nonetheless, a certain level of quantitativeness can also possibly be achieved by ways of analysing the interviews through coding. When coding is applied to the interview transcriptions, frequently recurring answers, trends, topics, or issues can be spotted, therefore covering both a factual and a meaning level (Kvale, 1996).

Semi-structured interviews are used, consisting of a balance between fixed response options and open-ended questions (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). Interviewees are asked the same set of “stem” questions, and based on their answers the interviewer asks follow-up questions. This type of interview enables questions to be written beforehand based on theory, whilst simultaneously allowing the interview to move forward tailoring the participants’ specific situation. Semi-structured interviews are “useful if the research question is in an established area of research where new discoveries can be made in areas of content and measurement of a phenomenon” (Wethington & McDarby, 2015, p. 3). Given that the latter is precisely the goal of the research, this method is suitable. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews are conducted via Zoom. This still provides the interviewer with a face-to-face interview, but at a safe distance from others and directly recorded. This online environment does not affect interviews much in terms of data collection, but a major disadvantage is possible technical difficulties affecting the flow of the interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). Interviews are between 40 minutes and one hour long. Since saturation is theorised to be found between six and twelve interviews (Guest et al., 2006), and no new themes or ideas were found after ten interviews, the sample size of the research is 10 participants.

### **3.1. Sampling**

The sample group consists of professional video game reviewers. No age or gendered preferences are used as to include a diverse group of participants. It might occur that the group of interviewees is male-dominated, since the field is generally male-dominated (Ivory, 2006). Interviewees are needed to meet certain requirements in terms of professionalism, since expert reviewers can legitimate as concluded in the previous chapter. According to Balthazard (2015), who, in turn, bases his theory on Freidson (2001), we can distinguish two types of professionals; members of recognised professions and professionals through being paid for their work. Naturally, these can coincide, but they do not necessarily need to. For example, a critic who reviews for an online website voluntarily can still be a professional, because they finished an education in the field, or because they have work experience in the field. What Balthazard (2015) further claims is that being a professional mainly entails that they are a member of a profession. They are further “linked to the upholding of the principles, law, ethics, and conventions of a profession in the form of a code of practice” (ACP, 2003). Based on Balthazard’s (2015) theory, therefore, the interviewees are required to fall into one or more of the following categories indicating professionalism: (1) They are paid to create video game reviews, (2) they have an educational background in the field (media studies, journalism, or video games) and create video game reviews voluntarily.

All interviewees are Dutch, since the Dutch gaming industry is roughly the same size as other gaming industries in Europe and since Dutch gamers are the most active online gamers of Europe (Dutch Game Garden, 2013). The Dutch gaming industry also shows an almost fifty-fifty split

between entertainment and applied gaming, meaning that there is not one dominating the other. This might provide a ‘neutral ground’ in the sense that Dutch gaming culture may not lean towards either entertainment or applied gaming. The interviewer is Dutch speaking, and foreign language use is, according to Welch and Piekkari (2006), critical to building rapport and eliciting authentic responses, since a person expresses oneself better in their native language. Multiple participants have experience with international education programmes and writing for international newspapers or websites. Therefore, they do not limit themselves to a possible ‘Dutch’ ideology or a specifically Dutch audience. All these characteristics make Dutch interviewees a suitable group to provide a representative view on the matter.

Interviewees have been recruited via either the interviewer’s personal network, via a recruitment message posted on LinkedIn, or via snowball sampling, where interviewees have suggested other possible participants. A respondents overview can be found in Appendix B.

### **3.2. Topic List and Questions to Be Asked**

Topics to be discussed with the interviewees include introductory questions, three main topics, and closing questions. Introductory questions address the interviewees’ name, preferred gender, educational background and occupational background. This is addressed to establish what type of professional the person is and what work they base their answers on. The first main topic addresses personal preferences regarding what video games mean to them and whether their profession(alism) is purely necessity-based, motivated from a personal affinity, or both. This is important to establish, because it could influence how they see video games. As Baumann (2001) states, the opinion of a critic influences or reflects the general consensus about the medium. Therefore, for example, interviewees are asked which types of games they prefer and why.

A second main topic discusses work; what a typical workday (of reviewing) looks like and “what goes into a video game review?”. How critics write reviews can tell us something about the content of their reviews; are they merely descriptions of the game or do they analyse games on a deeper level? When the latter is mentioned, for example, this is in line with the idea that more complex, in-depth reviews indicate a certain artistic legitimization (Baumann (2001); DiMaggio (1982); Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

The final main topic addresses the artistic and entertainment values of games; how video games are different from other media, whether they recognise games more as art, more as entertainment, or both, and why, which types of games they consider to be art and why, and whether they see possible changes regarding this in the future. These are the essential questions that this research is trying to answer, and therefore asking critics what their opinion on the matter is, helps answer the research question. Closing questions discuss whether they have anything else to share, to encourage participants to share more experiences or concerns about the research process (King et al., 2010).



### 3.3. Research Ethics

Research ethics in interviews, according to Bolderston (2012) are composed of two points. First, informed consent is needed. The interviewer informs interviewees of the study purposes and the types of questions they are asked. When interviewees are recruited, they are informed as to how the interviews are conducted, how long they will take, and that they will be audiotaped. Audiotapes' use are solely to transcribe, and quotes are seen by the interviewer, supervisor, and readers of the thesis. Secondly, privacy and confidentiality are discussed with the interviewee. Pseudonyms are used to discuss the interviewee. The title of the newspaper or website the interviewees write for will not be named, since Dutch companies are relatively small. Therefore, the anonymisation of the subjects could be compromised when companies are named in this research. In the respondents overview, the criteria on which they were selected will be mentioned to make a distinction between types of professionalism from the participants. For these purposes, interviewees are presented with a consent form in which these points are discussed and signed by the interviewee when agreed upon.

### 3.4. Analysis

For analysis of the data, qualitative content analysis (QCA) is used. QCA helps explain certain behaviour and patterns through "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Because the research goal is to find meaning in the similarities and differences in participants' views on video games by focusing on the characteristics of certain language, QCA suits this goal. QCA also uses quantification of data, which is applied in the analysis of this research. For example, counting instances of interviewees mentioning certain high art criteria as opposed to popular art criteria provides us with measurable data to base conclusions on. Conventional QCA uses deductive research, meaning that pre-existing theories are used to draw interpretative conclusions. This is very present here, because the research uses Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010)'s theories on high and popular art language use. Indicators of these criteria are taken into account when coding the interviews. For example, when comparisons to previously established high arts or terms like complexity are mentioned, they are labeled as a high art criterion. When games are mentioned to be present in museums, the overarching term 'institutionalisation' (Baumann, 2001) is used as a code. The data analysis also uses some inductive approaches, since themes other than high and popular art criteria that are still useful in answering the research question can emerge. For example, when several people mention that indie games are more inclined to be artistic than AAA games, this is still a noteworthy outcome that is not necessarily based on pre-existing theories by Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010).

In coding the data, Boeije's (2010) method of open, axial, and selective coding is used. This entails that interviews are first coded as much as possible. Similar open codes are then reduced, reflected upon, and reduced again until satisfaction is reached. For example, different statements

regarding an ambiguous stance towards the art versus entertainment debate were combined to create the code 'art versus entertainment is a spectrum'. Similar axial codes are then combined under the same umbrella term, like different types high art indicators being combined under the term 'high art criteria'. In the following chapter, the final coding results are discussed.

## 4. Results

In analysing the interview data through open, axial, and selective coding, four selective codes emerged that are discussed in the following sections. The selective codes are as follows: high art criteria, popular art criteria, art and entertainment, and the need for change.

### 4.1. High art criteria

Participants' view of an 'artistic' game consisted of many of the high art criteria theorised by Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010): complexity, unique style, having a message, and using the medium's unique qualities of interactivity were very prominent in the interviews. Therefore, the first selective code that emerged was high art criteria.

#### 4.1.1. High Art Language

When asked why interviewees found certain games artistic, terms like seriousness, ambiguity, and complexity emerged. This is an indicator of high art taken from the 'aesthetic disposition' theorised by Bordieu (1984). An example of this emerged when participant 4 (male, 28) discussed well-written villains:

.. your main character who is not necessarily good or bad, or the people you meet are not necessarily good or bad. They do everything for their own reasons... Yeah you see in the past few years, games have become more complex in that sense.

Another high art criterion is the use of evaluative criteria based on originality, innovation, or uniqueness (Van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010), which was mentioned by every respondent when discussing 'good' or artistic games. Participant 6 discussed his appreciation of these criteria in the following manner: "... and that is a very unique way.. very philosophical way to think about death. Because usually in a game it ends when you die or you start again. But in this game it actually starts with death." (male, 25). Here, philosophical thinking about serious subjects like death is appreciated by the respondent, reflecting an appreciation of complex subjects and unique approaches. This correlates with previous theories regarding a high art stance (Baumann, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

Every participant named at least one term theorised to be high art language (Baumann, 2001). Words like art, art style, aesthetic, tone, and atmosphere were frequently used. Three participants attempted to interpret a certain part of a game to be a metaphor. Use of auteurism also emerged, and two participants specifically named video game director Hideo Kojima. Every interviewee discussed the intelligence of the creative source behind games, an indicator that is valued by the 'aesthetic disposition' discussed by Bordieu (1984): "Well, level design is also.. is a trade of its own, so to speak," participant 6 (male, 25) mentioned. These are all very specific indicators of a high art stance

named by Baumann (2001), and the high frequency of this language use therefore points towards an artistic approach to video games by critics.

#### **4.1.2. Comparisons to High Art**

Comparisons to other already established art forms indicate a legitimization strategy (Baumann, 2001) and were very frequently found in the interviews, the most prominent being film. Every respondent made comparisons to film and most respondents did so multiple times. Participant 2 (male, 28) mentioned writing his bachelor's thesis on classic film techniques used in *Dishonoured*, applying his knowledge on classic film to critically analyse the game. Participant 4 mentioned storytelling techniques being used in *The Last of Us Part II*: "those are things, those are certain open endings that film and television also use very well I think" (male, 28).

Comparisons to music were made in three interviews. Two of these discussed games in relation to music in a similar manner, namely saying that "When film and music fall under art, I think that games can absolutely be involved in [art]. More so, even." (participant 8, male, 37). A third respondent, respondent 9 (male, 32), compared games' public status to rock music in the 70s and 80s, where parents would burn rock albums. He used this example to demonstrate that games are not accepted by older generations.

Two respondents made comparisons to literature, especially participant 3. She explained that artistic games to her are almost literary, and that she feels the desire to convince non-gamers that "here is a game that you can play that will give you the same feeling as that novel you read last week" (female, 35).

Lastly, comparisons to paintings were made in five different interviews, two discussing paintings in a sense of wanting to hang video game screenshots on their walls like a painting, and participant 6 mentioning "It is like a sort of.. Yeah those landscapes are also like a painting that you can walk through" (male, 25).

Not only was film mentioned in every interview, half of the interviews contained comparisons to the classical art form of painting, indicating that games can be placed along these already established art forms, in turn indicating an artistic stance (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

#### **4.1.3. Situating in Broader Contexts**

A first use of situating games in a broader context is a 'distance from the facile', meaning a negative stance towards commercialism or popular art (Baumann, 2001). When adopting the idea of AAA being the 'popular art' in gaming contexts, five respondents had a negative stance towards commercialism or popular art. While all respondents mentioned that not all AAA titles are bad games, they were generally seen as more negative than indie titles, mainly because of lack of originality and AAA studios being mainly interested in profitability: "Many decisions nowadays are being made based on big data and spreadsheets and focus groups. Really on what scores and what sells. And

sometimes that goes at the expense of the quality of a game” (participant 6, male, 25). Other negative stances towards AAA were aimed at certain studios not being inclusive towards members of the LGBTQ+ community or women.

Other a ‘distance from the facile’, situating games in broader contexts emerged in five respondents, who either placed games in broader contexts during the interview or mentioned the importance doing this within their work as a critic. The former was reflected in an example that participant 10 discussed regarding *Final Fantasy VII*. The respondent claimed that the game conveys a message about environmental issues when “you look a little deeper and dissect the story”<sup>3</sup> (male, 24). The latter was reflected in the interview with participant 9 (male, 32):

I think that a good critic, I mean, they try to name [facts] here and there, as long as they matter, but they also try to find the crux.. in the story, like, where does this game stand in the zeitgeist that we have, yeah, why does it matter, what does it mean for us, for the industry.

Mainly broadsheet newspaper writers expressed this importance of placing games in broader contexts, as they felt the need to explain why the game matters for a public that also consists of non-gamers. Doing so would convince a non-gaming public of the artistic values that games have, according to these broadsheet writers.

Participant 7 (male, 24) noted the psychological and physical benefits of gaming, such as games that help against psychological traumas like depression and PTSD, but also nursing homes that used the Nintendo Wii to help the elderly with rheumatics, and surgeons that played precision games who were found to be faster and more precise in their work.

Since “discussion of context positions the critic as an expert by providing the mediating knowledge needed to properly understand and appreciate” a medium (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010, p. 405), further confirming critics’ authoritative position in their judgments, these findings indicate a high art stance towards video games.

#### ***4.1.4. Nuance and Complexity in Reviews***

While earlier results already named nuance and complexity by critics, this code specifically discusses how critics apply nuance and complexity to their own reviews. When critics apply these characteristics to their own reviews in practice, this means that they try to convey a more complex view on video games to their audiences. This is what Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) theorise to be the legitimating authoritative power that critics possess.

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the respondent mentioned a certain timelessness of the game, timelessness also being a high art criterion according to Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010): “That is very special, that such a story is still so relevant after 24 years” (participant 10, male, 24).

Most respondents discussed the importance of naming both positives and negatives in a review, not merely giving a one-sided view of the product being judged, which is in line with one of Baumann's (2001) high art criteria: "... that is of course the most important in a review right? That you name the positive and the negative sides" (participant 4, male, 28).

Levels of complexity further emerged relating to Baumann's (2001) concept of seeing the merit in failure. On several occasions, respondents mentioned the struggle of reviewing games they did not necessarily appreciate. They explained they could still see the merit in these games. Participant 9 said: "I do not like shooters at all, that is not a genre for me. But.. I can see what makes a *Call of Duty* or a *Halo* interesting and write about that and form an opinion on it" (male, 32). Still seeing the merit in these games, even though they do not have affinity with them, means that these critics view the medium in different ways which "indicates a complex, multifaceted approach" (Baumann, 2001, p. 417), an important indicator of a high art stance according to the author.

Additionally, all respondents claimed that their own opinion is not an ultimate truth that the public needs to adopt, and that everyone has their own preferences, hereunder seen from participant 8 (male, 37):

You cannot say that a game is purely good or bad. You can only say, this game is good or bad in *my* opinion, because like all forms of entertainment or art, everything is in the eye of the beholder. Everything is according to the person seeing or playing it.

Seeing their own opinion on a game as a subjective thing and saying that their opinion is not an ultimate truth once more displays a nuanced and complex outlook by the critic. Six respondents expressed their aversion towards giving scores, since they would not be nuanced enough. This reflects an importance of nuance and providing the audience with a multifaceted and complex approach. They emphasised that argumentation, structure, and story of the review is more important than scores or descriptions: "It can reduce a game to a number and I often don't agree with that" (participant 1, male, 25). This preference of structure and argumentation over description also relates to the idea of 'form over function' that is connected to aesthetic dispositions (DiMaggio, 1982).

#### **4.1.5. Form over Function**

The aesthetic disposition of 'form over function' was found in relation to which aspects reviewers judge games on. Four main judging aspects of games were music or audio, technical aspects like graphics and framerate, storytelling, and gameplay. The aspects of storytelling and gameplay were found most in respondents, where some preferred one and some preferred the other. In all these cases, a 'form over function' was found in that the *way* in which either gameplay or story is executed is more important than a level of 'fun' or other functionalities of gaming, meaning an aesthetic disposition is adopted (DiMaggio, 1982).

In five interviews, participants noted that the main importance of judging a game is how all different aspects complement each other and how these aspects fit together to create a whole. Participant 7 explained this when asked how his outlook on games changed since his work and studies: “I have started to look much more at how certain things fit together” (male, 24). Again, here the focus lies not necessarily on functionality, but on *how* aspects are put together in a certain manner to create a good game.

Another instance of ‘form over function’ in quality judgments of reviewers is a strong dependence on either what the game tries to achieve or genre. Seven respondents noted that different aspects are important depending on what type of game is discussed. Participant 5 (female, 23) explained that “with me it is about what the game tries to achieve and how well that is executed”, again focusing on *how* a game conveys a vision. Other respondents answered similarly, with some focusing more on genres:

Fighting games, you have the frame rate that is very important, that it feels smooth, plays smooth ... When you play *GTA*, how realistic it looks ... *Call of Duty*, how realistic the bullet hits someone ... That kind of stuff ... That depends per genre. (participant 7, male, 24).

This dependence on game or genre relates to the increasing importance of classification, an external factor to the legitimization of art forms mentioned earlier (DiMaggio, 1982, 1987).

#### **4.1.6. Medium Specificity**

Medium specificity is a term used to describe the features of a medium that are unique to the nature of that particular medium (Carroll, 1985), which, in the context of video games is about what the medium offers that is inherent to video games: interactivity. Interactivity was an unexpectedly frequent subject mentioned by participants. It is not a high art criterion according to Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010), nonetheless, it was added to high art criteria, because participants placed the medium in broader contexts and compared it to established high arts in order to explain why games are so unique. This also indicates a level of critical thinking, since the critics discussing medium specificity were able to reflect on the medium’s unique qualities and how they affect the consumer. All these approaches are legitimating high art criteria, as theorised by the aforementioned authors.

Three respondents discussed the medium’s, in participant 2’s words, ‘ambient storytelling’: “... what are they telling you without directly telling you ... You are told only so much and the rest you discover through the way the world is formed and the things you see instead of direct storytelling” (male, 28). All three respondents referred to *Dark Souls*, where the things a player chooses to pick up tell them about the world around them, saying that interactivity is crucial in telling stories in these games. “That is, I think, in a way that only games can tell a story in a way that only

games can. A film cannot do that in that manner,” participant 4 (male, 28) explained. This reflects both a focus on medium specificity as well as a comparison to other high arts.

Interactivity was a medium specific element mentioned by nine respondents. Not only does interactivity evoke players’ own creativity, “you see that more and more with story-based games, that you can make choices that influence the game later on” (respondent 7, male, 24), but most of all, interactivity was seen as a medium specific manner of creating immersion and engagement. Participant 4 (male, 28) explained this in the following manner:

[games] can tell stories in a very special way and can really immerse you, you can really, you can sometimes even create your own character in a game or you step into a character’s shoes. And the experience that you then have in a story is much more intense than with a film or series, I think.

Many other respondents expressed medium specificity in a similar way, comparing games to other media and claiming that games’ interactivity is what makes the medium unique, indicating complex thinking about the medium in the broader context of established media, which, in turn, indicates a high art stance (Baumann, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

## **4.2. Popular Art Criteria**

Popular art aesthetic criteria are also based on Baumann’s (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz’s (2010) theories and indicate lack of depth and authority of the reviewer. A lack of depth and authority, according to the authors, indicates a ‘popular art’ stance and a position wherein legitimation is difficult to achieve.

### **4.2.1. Negativity towards High Art**

A negative stance towards high art goes directly against Kantian aesthetics (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010), and shows an opposition against criteria that are deemed valuable in a high art stance. Merely one respondent, participant 8 (male, 37), had a negative stance towards the need to legitimate games as an art form:

I would almost like to ask: what does it matter?! I mean, does it matter whether we see games as art or as an artistic product? I mean, games exist, they are a success, millions of people enjoy them and every year more people do. It’s okay.

The respondent did not explicitly go against high art, but against the need for the legitimation of games. He explained that both seeing games as an art and seeing games as just entertainment are valid opinions, and that it does not really matter whether more people see them as art or not.



He also mentioned that entertainment or AAA is automatically seen as bad. Slight frustration was found when he stated: “Why would one thing be called art or not, and the other thing be called a ‘mainstream’ product with this slightly bad aftertaste?” (participant 8, male, 37). Participant 8 therefore stated his frustrations with the need for artistic legitimization of games and with the negative tone that emerges when others discuss the mainstream. It is remarkable that merely one respondent had this strong stance in the legitimization of games and against classification of indie versus AAA games, while other respondents all expressed this as an importance to a certain extent.

#### **4.2.2. User Orientation**

According to Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010), user orientation is a popular art criterion, because instead of focusing on what the audience *should* like (meaning an authoritative stance from the critic), an audience-oriented approach focuses on whether they *will* like it. Two respondents emphasised the consumer’s experience with the medium. While these respondents did not explicitly mention prediction of audiences enjoying the product, they both noted the importance of determining the target audience: “.. when you look at the target group for *Pokémon*, that is of course very different from someone who wants to play *Dark Souls*. So then the way you review also becomes different” (participant 2, male, 28). Participant 9 explained that, for a gaming website, one can go more into detail, “.. they want to know, a new shooter came out, what is it like in comparison to shooter b, c, d, e? And which weapons are in it and such. And then you need to go through it almost factually” (male, 32), whereas in a broadsheet article, reviews are much more focused on broader contexts.

User orientation also emphasises the functionality of the product. When asked what attracts them to games, three respondents mentioned one’s own improvement in their answers. All three respondents emphasised that this comes with a sense of satisfaction: “The feeling that you are achieving something, so.. when you play through the story, you get a feeling of progression, satisfaction. Things like high scores. That is.. very interesting to keep going further, scoring higher, getting better...” (participant 7, male, 24). Further functionality of the product was based on the social aspect of gaming, which was mentioned to be a big factor in the enjoyment of games by six respondents. Multiple respondents explained that their love for video games started with this social aspect, when they, as a child, liked to discuss video games with their friends in the schoolyard. For participant 4, the social aspect also means competition with others (male, 28). As opposed to ‘form over function’, these examples point towards a ‘function over form’ stance, going against DiMaggio’s ideas of a high art stance (1982).

#### **4.2.3. Participatory Experience**

A focus on the participatory experience is a big part of popular art criteria. First, a focus on the importance of ‘fun’ emerged from three participants. This importance was, in all three participants, expressed when talking about writing reviews and about what the audience wants to read:

“Yeah, for every review I think it is important to at least make clear, is it fun to play?” (participant 10, male, 24). However, they further moved on to say that they personally look beyond mere fun, and judge games in a more analytical manner than that. This indicates a professional stance instead of a user stance (Santos et al., 2019).

Seven respondents discussed the importance of engagement or immersion in gaming. This was very important to respondents, since the medium specificity of interactivity was said to evoke much immersion in them. This importance of immersion in turn resulted in respondents focusing on the experience and emotion that emerge from certain games. Nine respondents stressed that evoking emotion and the creation of an immersive experience is one of the most important things that make a game qualitatively good. When asked what makes certain games good, most respondents answered saying that they got emotional. Evoking an emotional experience was said to be an important indicator of a game being artistic according to five respondents. Respondents naming this as a factor that indicates whether a game is to be considered art was a remarkable result, since emotionality actually indicates a popular art stance according to Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010). An example of this is participant 10, who said: “I think that is kind of the definition of art, that a product, whatever it is, evokes a certain emotion in you” (male, 24). Another respondent reacted in a similar manner: “I think art is also triggering people a little. Yeah, some people get that from paintings that they get very emotional, and some people get that from a game or film” (participant 4, male, 28). This artistic outlook on emotionality and experience directly contradicts Van Venrooij and Schmutz’s (2010) statements regarding emotion. Emotions are universally ‘human’, meaning that a focus on feelings in reviews is too ‘ordinary’, not adopting a ‘higher’ outlook on cultural products (Bourdieu, 1984).

While emotionality supposedly is a popular art stance, it seems possible that the high frequency of focus on emotion, as predicted beforehand, is due to video games’ medium specificity being interactivity and participation. Interactivity, which evokes this emotion according to participants, is inescapable in video gaming, since active participation is always required of the consumer. Therefore, a focus on the participatory experience is not entirely misplaced here, and might not only be reserved for popular art when discussing video games.

### **4.3. Art and Entertainment**

The following codes are based on to what extent video game critics consider games to be either art or entertainment, and additionally how they view indie games and AAA games in this regard.

#### ***4.3.1. Art versus Entertainment Is a Spectrum***

The debate around games as art or entertainment was approached from a relatively nuanced angle by four respondents, who claim that there is not one or the other, and that there is some artistic value in every game. These respondents all stated that some games have more art potential or artistic

value than others, but there is always a creative director behind a game, meaning that an artistic vision is always being used to some extent or another. Participant 7 added that all games are art, “because of the simple reason that there are many games that are not purely entertainment” (male, 24), which he explained by naming the physical and psychological benefits of gaming mentioned earlier. Participant 4 also referred to people’s own creativity that can make games artistic: “For example *Minecraft* or something. The constructions that people make there. That, maybe you can also call that an art in itself” (male, 28).

Another angle on this debate was taken by two respondents. Participant 8, for example, stated that, while simultaneously claiming that games all games are art in some manner, “Every game is made by a company, every company wants to earn money, yeah, so every game is in itself already a commercial product” (male, 37), before, like aforementioned, expressing his frustrations about mainstream products always being discussed with a bitter aftertaste. These respondents take an ambiguous stance by saying there is always a profit incentive in game development.

#### **4.3.2. Pure Entertainment**

While four respondents claimed that every game can be art, two of these respondents contradicted themselves later by mentioning certain (types of) games that are pure entertainment, going against their earlier statements claiming art and entertainment are not mutually exclusive.

Participant 7 claiming all games are art since they are simply not pure entertainment, because they have (mental) health benefits, later on claimed that simple puzzle games, like sudoku games and mobile games are pure entertainment, “where literally one particular thing results in brainlessly playing games” (male, 24).

Another genre mentioned twice as pure entertainment is party games. Yet, the most frequently named genre in the context of pure entertainment was sports games. Specifically *FIFA* was named in multiple instances. Four respondents stressed that the franchise is ‘bad’, because the games are not innovative, or simply all the same. This reflects a high art stance of appreciating innovation and originality. Three of these further noted specifically that they have a very broad interest in games and see the interesting aspects of every genre, except sports games. Therefore, while stating that they can see the benefits of every game, they contradict themselves by saying that the sports genre really is ‘mere’ entertainment and has no artistic values. This suggests a classification of different games, in which some genres have more value than others (DiMaggio, 1982).

Other specific games named to be mainly or purely entertainment were *Assassin’s Creed*, *Call of Duty*, and *Fortnite*. Focus on commercialism and not being innovative mainly emerged as reasons why these games were deemed mainly or purely entertainment. This is in line with high art criteria, in which an opposition against commercialism and ‘mere’ entertainment suggests an intellectual and authoritative stance, indicating legitimization strategies (Bauman, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

#### 4.3.3. AAA as Art

The games mentioned above are, excluding *Fortnite*, all AAA titles<sup>4</sup>. Nine respondents consider AAA to have the most potential to be entertainment, rather than indie games. Previously, a negative stance towards commercialism emerged in five respondents, with all respondents relating this to AAA titles. The participants say that these massive productions of AAA games have big teams, big expenses, and big investors and audiences to please, resulting in less risk-taking, less diversity, and less innovation or creative freedom during game development, which is in line with earlier theories (Brightman, 2015; Latorre, 2016):

If a game is to be artistic you need freedom. And you don't always have that with a developer where you work on a game with 600 others. Because you are... Some people literally deal with animating pavements. That is their part. So how can you still call that art? (participant 6, male, 25)

The respondent here questions whether something can be called art when there are so many people working on one game. In AAA games, such amounts of employees are very common (Ponce, 2013). Therefore, participant 6 implies that it is much more difficult for AAA games to be considered art.

Participant 8 related lack of risk-taking to pleasing the audience: "... there are millions of dollars in it ... and so the money needs to be recouped. So they need to streamline it much more, they need to make sure the largest possible audience will enjoy it" (male, 37). This is similar to Holbrook's (1999) claims regarding accessibility of popular aesthetics.

Every respondent also mentioned that AAA games have the ability to be artistic, where two factors emerged: innovation and storytelling.

Artistic potential based on innovation was discussed by respondents on a technical and a creative level, the latter being more present in interviewee's answers. *Zelda* was named as an example of AAA's technical development: "That started with a little green guy in a field with a few lines of text from the characters to an open world with a story and side quests and all that stuff. And the visuals really improved." (participant 5, female, 23). *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Death Stranding* were praised on an artistic level, because they take characteristics of typical indie games (slower pacing and the walking simulator genre) and apply it to big budget productions. This implies that indie characteristics have more artistic potential.

Artistic potential based on storytelling was mainly discussed in reference to complexity, a high art criterion (Baumann, 2001). A respondent named *God of War* as an example of how video

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<sup>4</sup> While *Fortnite* started out as an indie, with its massive success, it was picked up by Epic Games as publisher, meaning it can be categorised as a triple-I. However, there is some uncertainty in this, since the budgets and development teams have become increasingly bigger over time, with over 700 employees working on the game as of 2018 (Maulana, 2018).

games have become more complex: “from a raging man to a father who needs to keep his son alive” (participant 5, female, 23). She explained a focus on fatherhood by saying that the people who grew up playing video games are now in their fatherhood. *The Last of Us Part II* was undoubtedly the most frequently named when respondents were asked to name an artistic AAA game, with six respondents mentioning the game. What makes the game so artistic, according to them, is a level of ambiguity that is created by using its medium specificity. Namely, the game uses two very different perspectives: the main protagonist who is seeking revenge, and the person she is taking revenge on. This results in the player being forced to play as both the “hero” and the “villain” of the story, in turn resulting in “your main character is not necessarily good or bad or the people you meet are not good or bad, they do everything for their own reasons” (participant 4, male, 28). Two respondents mentioned that the game does this in a manner that only games can, because the player is forced to interact with and ‘become’ both characters and to see both perspectives. Additionally, the game was said to take risks by using two female main characters, one of whom is lesbian, while most AAA games take a white, heterosexual, male perspective (Rath, 2014). Lastly, the game was said to have a message about how revenge and war is an endless cycle that only results in more pain, according to participant 10 (male, 24). Here we see that, again, a high art stance is adopted by participants saying that complexity, placing in bigger contexts, risk-taking, uniqueness, and using medium specificity is what makes this AAA game art.

#### **4.3.4. Indie as Art**

The nine respondents who claimed AAA games to have more entertainment potential also claimed that indie games, then, have more artistic potential. When asked about artistic games, six respondents immediately named indie titles like *Stardew Valley* or *12 Minutes*, with participant 4 noticing: “I immediately start thinking of indies somehow” (male, 28). Keeping in line with a ‘unity of opposites’, unlike AAA, indie games have small teams, limited resources, and niche audiences, resulting in more creative freedom, more risk-taking, and more distinct styles (Latorre, 2016). According to all ten respondents, freedom is the most important reason why indie games have more artistic potential:

What I really notice in indies that I consider artistic, is that they make a more personal and stronger story. Where big studios with budgets and that they need to convince 10.000 layers of management, indies often are just like.. I want to make this and whoever wants to publish it can come. (participant 7, male, 24)

This freedom was the most important factor behind a game’s artisticness to participants, and since it was not very broadly discussed in previous chapters, the frequent emphasis on freedom made by participants was an unexpected outcome of the research. Furthermore, “they have less technically, less

money, less time, so they have to experiment to make a different kind of product” (participant 8, male, 37). Therefore, through lack of resources a certain level of creativity is needed, “because since there are so many, you really need to create a reason to play a specific one and not another one” (participant 2, male, 28). This is in line with earlier statements regarding creativity through necessity (Jahn-Sudmann, 2008; Stanley, 2020). Lastly, “your audience is allowed to be a little smaller” (participant 3, female, 35), so niche audiences are not necessarily seen as bad, meaning more experimental and risky angles are possible according to participants. These last statements perhaps relate to the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’, where the focus lies not on commercialism but on the personal and aesthetic expression on an individual (Singer, 1954).

As opposed to AAA titles, art style was one of the main factors that interviewees appreciated in artistic indie games. There was no particular style specifically appreciated by respondents, since indie games vary much from game to game in terms of style. Appreciation of art style was mostly paired with language use like ‘uniqueness’, ‘special’, and ‘different’, and hand drawn art styles were appreciated by two respondents, relating to high art criteria again.

A second factor of appreciation in indie games was, like in AAA, storytelling. Whereas in AAA games having a message and using interactivity in a unique manner emerged, in indie games storytelling was mainly appreciated when very personal stories were used to evoke emotions in the player or when the storytelling used a unique style. An example of personal stories that two respondents named was *That Dragon, Cancer*. This game was created by one developer “.. who lost his child to cancer and to process that, really as an expression, he created a game about it”. This was appreciated, because “when you are talking about art as an expression, then that is a very good example of that” (participant 6, male, 25). According to participants, therefore, art means telling a story in a unique manner or evoking emotion in the player. An example of unique styles of storytelling that emerged twice was *12 Minutes*. Here, the setting is an apartment, where the player needs to find information about what happened to their wife and her father, and where time resets every twelve minutes. Participant 4 said that “.. in such a minimalist way, the developer creates so much tension and lets you get carried away so much in finding out what happened” (male, 28). Here, participants appreciated how the developer creates an emotional game with minimal resources in a unique manner, meaning that evoking emotions was an important factor of a game being ‘art’.

#### **4.4. The Need for Change**

One topic during the interviews revolved around to what extent respondents considered non-gamers or the mainstream media to accept games as an art form. This is relevant for answering the research question, since it can tell us how participants look at games’ artistic legitimization and how they consider this to differ from the general acceptance thereof.

#### **4.4.1. Games Are (Slowly) Accepted**

Games were found to be (partly) accepted as art by the public already, according to participants. Indicators of institutionalisation based on Baumann's (2001) factors were frequently found in sampling and interviews. First, one respondent works at a museum and is curator of video game exhibitions, meaning that Dutch museums apparently implement video games in their exhibitions. Second, several respondents write about games for mainstream media, meaning that broadsheet newspapers discuss video games (in an in-depth manner). Third, the aforementioned indie game *12 Minutes* used voice critically acclaimed actors like Daisy Ridley, James McAvoy, and Willem Dafoe, reflecting 'high-status participators'. This means a certain acceptance of video games as art is already happening.

One respondent considered video games to be completely legitimated already: "... games are taken just as seriously as film, and that is logical, because it is a huge billion dollar industry, even more than that ... So in that sense we don't have to fight for that anymore" (participant 8, male, 37). This implies that the participant considers the economic success of the medium to be the same as its artistic legitimization.

Two respondents mentioned that stereotypes about gamers are completely gone, indicating that gamers are accepted and not looked down upon. Respondents referred to stereotypes like gaming causing violence or gamers being lonely men or children. A third respondent mentioned that this differs per country; in the U.S., stereotypes about gaming causing violence are much more present still (participant 7, male, 24). Three others mentioned that when they were in high school, gaming was seen as only being for nerds, which is not the case anymore: "See, the stigma that was there.. ten years ago ... that is gone fortunately, but games are still seen as, oh yeah games are fun, but they're fun. There is not much else.." (participant 10, male, 24).

This idea of games seen as 'just being fun' was also present in others, who believe games are merely accepted as a mainstream product, because according to them, just the economic value of games is strongly recognised. This indicates that participants see games as more 'just' their economic value. Participant 7 (male, 24) feels that, specifically through the COVID-19 pandemic, games are increasingly seen as economically and socially valuable: "... those stories of people who couldn't meet others anymore, that they met online and played online games. And that is how games have.. have a whole different image. To a lot of older people too.". He and other respondents also mentioned the impact that COVID-19 has had on game sales, which resulted in worldwide shortages of, for example, Nintendo Switch consoles (Szmodis, 2020). This could mean that, since games' economic values are recognized increasingly, this can lead towards artistic legitimacy (Harrington et al., 2015).

Lastly, five respondents mentioned that, while games are not accepted as artistic, in the future this will change, because the amount of people who grew up playing games will simply increase. Therefore, it will naturally change over time since the medium is relatively young still, but we are not

there just yet. This was meant by participants as a hopeful thought, implying that it would be a positive thing if games were to be accepted as an art form.

#### ***4.4.2. Change Is Needed***

The reason why video games are not taken seriously as an art form just yet, according to participants, was mainly directed at older generations. Seven respondents shared the opinion that older people do not accept games as valuable, because they simply did not grow up with video games. Participant 3 (female, 35), for example, talked about how she is still trying to convince her mother of games' value, but that she did not succeed in that yet. This implies a desire to convince people of games' values. Participant 1 (male, 25) discusses difficulties at his work because of a bias that older people seem to have:

I am often competing against older colleagues who don't understand. They're.. the rejection already starts with the mentioning of video games. They really immediately shut down the moment they hear games, because they think, that's not for me, only for 10 year olds.

These participants believe that games are a big threshold for older people to cross since, for them, it is a completely unfamiliar medium. Participant 3 (female, 35) mentioned that this threshold is much bigger than for someone to watch an arthouse film: it is more expensive and the player needs to invest more time. This creates a certain "membrane" in her words, which is "titan work to shift that image" (participant 3, female, 35). Again, the desire to shift that image was very present in respondents.

While several respondents mentioned stereotypes about gamers do not exist anymore, several others disagreed. Participant 5 (female, 23) claims that stereotypes are very present in broadsheet newspapers, which is her thesis subject for her studies. Her research pointed towards Dutch broadsheet newspapers focusing on addiction stereotypes of gaming (Cover, 2006).

Furthermore, mainstream media outlets were said to focus most on AAA games and not on artistic or indie games, which means that artistic/indie apparently is different from AAA. Participant 3 explained a focus on AAA by saying: "Because people play those anyway. And then you better have something to say about it as a newspaper" (female, 35). Three respondents expressed their feelings of having a purpose to educate people of the value of games in society and to inform them of their benefits and to break stereotypes about gamers. This heavily implies that participants both adopt a high art stance, and that they feel the need to explain to people of games' artistic values, meaning that they discuss them as an art form.

#### ***4.4.3. Change within the Industry***

Interviewees expressed that the gaming industry itself is very flawed, and that this needs to change in order to welcome more people into the industry and for the industry to be taken more



seriously. These ‘flaws’ were specifically meant as a lack of diversity and a toxic gaming community. This matches ideas of a critical outlook on the industry they work in, appreciation of risk-taking, and going against pure accessibility, reflecting a high art outlook.

Indie games were praised for being inclusive of LGBTQ+ employees or implementing these perspectives in games, simply because they can take more risks. *The Last of Us Part II* having a lesbian character was therefore seen as a very positive thing, and also as extraordinary, implying that diverse AAA games are uncommon, meaning that participants praised unique perspectives and risk-taking in games.

Six respondents stressed the importance of including female gamers, reviewers, and perspectives in video games. They expressed that diversity provides more unique perspectives and risk-taking, resulting in more complex stories and less ‘generic’ games or stories. This preference of risk-taking, complexity, and originality, yet again, reflects a high art stance. At the time of the interviews, several lawsuits were filed against development studio Activision Blizzard for sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, making sexism in the industry a frequently discussed subject during the interviews: “I thought it was going in the right direction, but every year it is another developer. In 2019 it was Riot Games, 2020 it was Ubisoft, and now in 2021 it’s Blizzard’s turn to be revealed as discriminating” (participant 5, female, 23). In this sense, the industry was said to be extremely flawed, especially ‘behind the scenes’.

Sexism in the games community was also discussed by five respondents. Participant 5 named the term ‘game gatekeeping’, describing the concept of male gamers trying to actively keep out women, or having to protect female players from being harassed in *World of Warcraft* (female, 23). An example of this ‘game gatekeeping’ was named by respondent 2 when he talked about female esports players: “.. there was a woman who had a 95% win rate with Zarya ... but she wasn’t allowed to play in an esports team, because she is a woman” (male, 28). Despite existing sexism surrounding video games, respondents mentioned that the situation is improving. Participant 3 noted that “17% or 19% of PlayStation 1 owners were female. And nowadays that is above 40% for the PlayStation 4” (female, 35). The increased acceptance of female gamers was seen as a good thing, because, for one, it increases the amount of players meaning that the industry would grow. Secondly, if a higher percentage of gamers is female, the aim of video games would become more diverse and would provide more unique stories and games, according to participants. Again, the appreciation of diversity in games indicates a complex and critical outlook on the industry, which indicates a high art stance (Baumann, 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1. Discussion of the Research Data**

When comparing research results, considerable differences can be found between high and popular art criteria. High art criteria not only had simply more codes that emerged, but high art criteria were mentioned significantly more frequently than popular art criteria. The participatory experience is a criterion typically belonging to popular art. However, it is also inherent to the medium of video games through their always present interactivity. This means that the boundaries between popular and high art was found to be more nuanced than Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010) claim. The focus on the participatory experience by respondents might, therefore, not necessarily imply a popular art stance. Overall, the focus of participants on high art criteria implies an association between video game critics and a high art perspective, supporting the idea that video games are considered a legitimate medium by critics as posed by Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz, (2010).

With regards to the ‘art versus entertainment’ debate and games’ artistic potential, several notable conclusions presented themselves. Six participants claimed a relatively nuanced perspective on the art versus entertainment debate, ultimately saying that art versus entertainment is a spectrum, meaning that they are not mutually exclusive. Some of these participants also claimed that sports games are pure entertainment and therefore have little artistic value, apparently saying that entertainment would exclude art. The most common thought was AAA games having more entertainment potential and indie games having more artistic potential, this being in line with the previously established dichotomy between the two. This is consistent with the theories that high art criteria were based on; an aversion towards commercialism (related to AAA games) (Baumann, 2001) and an appreciation of uniqueness and distinct styles (related to indie games) (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010). Participants still noted that AAA games can certainly be artistic, only less frequently, overall reflecting a nuanced perspective on the matter in which a game being AAA does not necessarily exclude artistic potential.

A final subject that emerged during the research was the need for change within the industry as well as the need for a change in the outlook on the industry from outside perspectives. When discussing how people outside the industry look at games, participants expressed a strong desire for games to be accepted as an art form, and conveyed that games are not at the same legitimate level as other media (yet). These results imply that critics believe games to be a form of art. While some participants expressed that games are not accepted yet, they did name multiple instances of institutionalisation in the interviews, indicating a legitimisation process according to previous theories (Baumann, 2001; DiMaggio, 1982). However, most participants nonetheless expressed that games are not taken seriously as an art form.

## **5.2. Conclusions**

Based on the abovementioned results and discussion, the research question of how video game critics evaluate video games and to what extent they legitimise video games as a form of art can be answered. A strongly present high art stance, a much less present popular art stance, and a strong desire for the artistic legitimisation of video games lead us to conclude that video game critics certainly accept video games as a form of art. Hence, we can affirm that video games, together with the already established internal and external legitimating factors of video games, are most definitely making progress in terms of becoming legitimated as an art form.

The theories previously used as a basis for this research proved to be very suitable in answering the research question, since very similar language and ideas were found to be expressed by participants. A big difference from previous studies regarding other media types was the idea of experience and emotional response, which is theorised to be inherent to a popular art aesthetic (Van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010). In video games, however, a focus on the experience is very much inherent to the medium, since participation and engagement are always strongly present in the consumption of video games. Therefore, while categorising the term under the selective code of popular art criteria, there are reasons to argue that a focus on the participatory experience is not ‘merely’ a popular art criterion and that there is more nuance to the division between high and popular art criteria.

The qualitative method of interviewing, which is not consistent with other studies regarding critics and legitimisation, proved to be suitable, since it gave an insight into the thoughts behind certain ideas of participants. For example, freedom in indie development proved to be a very important factor in these games having more artistic potential, while this was only shortly discussed beforehand. Furthermore, through the method of interviewing, when a certain game was named, for instance, insight into whether this game was approached negatively or positively was made available. This provided relevant information, since a negative stance towards certain (types of) AAA games and an overwhelmingly positive stance towards indie games allowed us to conclude which types of games were seen as more artistic. This would be different if the research was conducted in a purely quantitative manner. Therefore, the method proved to provide noteworthy contexts and explanations for certain opinions.

## **5.3. Limitations and Further Research**

There were two main limitations to the research: critics’ nationality and writing platforms. First, using only Dutch participants could possibly have influenced the outcome of the research. Three respondents mentioned that video games or specifically video game reviews are approached differently in different countries or continents. In Japan, for example, video games are a much bigger part of the culture than in Europe, and in the U.S., one respondent mentioned, stereotypes about

gamers are much more present than in Europe. Additionally, gaming journalism is relatively small in The Netherlands according to respondents. While not being entirely representative of, for example, U.S. or Japanese perspectives, using Dutch interviewees could still provide a representative perspective of European views on games. This is because the industry in The Netherlands is around the same size as other European game industries, and because the division between AAA game and indie game development is around fifty-fifty (Dutch Game Garden, 2013). Additionally, respondents did not exclusively work for Dutch websites or newspapers, meaning that their audiences are not all Dutch. Because Dutch gaming journalism is so difficult to build a career in, respondents needed much (volunteer) experience or talent to be successful. Therefore, while the industry is small, it is likely that interviewees possess a relatively high skill set or high amount of experience in the field, providing a professional and therefore authoritative position in art legitimization. A second limitation was that many respondents write for gaming websites specifically. Because they write for websites aimed at gamers, it is difficult to tell to what extent they are able to legitimate video games in order to convince the public about games' artistic values. However, this makes them more likely to write reviews about indie games, since these are apparently rarely discussed in broadsheet newspapers, where mostly AAA games are discussed. Additionally, the respondents that (partly) write for broader news platforms like broadsheet newspapers felt a much bigger sense of 'purpose' to educate people on the artistic value that video games can bring than niche website writers. Therefore, the critics that write for the broadest public try to situate games in a broader context more than niche writers, in order to convince the public that games can and must be seen as art.

Relating to these limitations, further research could expand the knowledge on the artistic legitimization of video games by either using respondents from different countries as opposed to one country, or from mainstream news platforms as opposed to using several participants who write for niche websites. This might give more thorough insights into the legitimization of video games, since a broader outlook would be used. Additionally, while the qualitative research method certainly provided a comprehensive in-depth look into critics' opinions on the matter, a quantitative research method similar to Baumann's (2001) would also provide valuable data on the subject matter, especially when taking an approach that also observes differences over the decades. However, the medium is still relatively new as opposed to, for example, film, which might make such research more difficult. Nevertheless, there is much research still to be conducted regarding the subject, especially because the medium is just now gaining more and more attention from the general public and is on the cusp of being publicly considered a form of art.

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## Appendix A

### 1. General demographic information

- Name
- Age, preferred gender
- Background, national and ethnic
- Educational background
- Current work
- Background on their work; How long have you worked here? Is this your first job in the video games industry?

### 2. Personal preferences

- What does reviewing video games mean to you? Is it purely a job or do you have any personal affinity with video games as well?

*[If answered with only a job]*

- Is there any other specific reason you started reviewing video games then, or did you just naturally gravitate towards the job?
- Why did you not like video games in the first place?
- To what extent do you enjoy playing video games now that you do it for a living? Has anything changed in the way you look at games?
- Even if you don't like video games now, which is your preferred genre or game to play if you had to choose?

*[If answered with personal affinity]*

- Which types of video games do you personally like most and why?
- What are some of your favourite games of all time and why?
- What do you love most about video games?
- Has your interest in video games changed since you started working as a reviewer? Has your interest in them increased or decreased, for example?

### 3. Work

- What does a typical workday look like for you? Could you describe what you do in a day's work?
- How do you play video games that you review? Is it on PC or a specific console?
- Do you specialize in some specific genre of games, if so which one (and why)?

- What does the selection process for games look like? Are you asked to review a specific game or are you free in this regard?
- What type of reader do you usually have?
- What goes into a video game review? Which points are you required to mention in a review?
- What is, for you, the most important thing to mention in a review?
- What is, for you, the most important thing that makes a video game good?

#### **4. Games: art or entertainment?**

- In which way do you think video games are distinct from other types of media?
- What do you think about video games as an art form? Do you think they can be art? Why or why not?
- Are games then more entertainment or more an art?

*[if answered with yes]*

- When do you think a video game becomes art? What are the requirements in your eyes for a game to be ‘artistic’ or purely entertainment?
- Can you name some examples of art games and why you find them artistic?
- Do you think video games have become more accepted as art over the years? Why do you think that is the case?

*[if answered with no]*

- Do you think video games have become more accepted as art over the years? Why do you think that is the case?
- Do you think they will become more artistic or accepted as art in the future? Why?
- Can AAA games be art? Why?
- Can indie games be art? Why?
- Do you think AAA or indie are better suited for being artistic? And why do you think that is the case?

#### **5. Closing questions**

- Do you have anything else you want to share?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interviewee #1:**

Age: 25

Gender: Male

Level of Education: MA (journalism)

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: Storyteller for a museum, volunteer writer for gaming websites

Type of organisation they work for: museum, gaming websites

Sampling criteria: voluntary review writer, educated in journalism

### **Interviewee #2:**

Age: 28

Gender: male

Level of Education: bachelor (film and literary science)

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: writer, reviewer

Type of organisation they work for: gaming websites

Sampling criteria: voluntary and paid review writer, educated in media studies

### **Interviewee #3:**

Age: 35

Gender: female

Level of Education: HBO journalism

Place of residence: -

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: games journalist

Type of organisation they work for: broadsheet newspaper

Sampling criteria: paid review writer, educated in journalism

### **Interviewee #4:**

Age: 28

Gender: male

Level of Education: HBO journalism

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: editor and writer of games articles and reviews

Type of organisation they work for: online gaming website with a big audience

Sampling criteria: paid review writer, educated in journalism

### **Interviewee #5:**

Age: 23

Gender: female

Level of Education: HBO journalism (no degree yet)

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: writer, reviewer for gaming website

Type of organisation they work for: gaming website

Sampling criteria: voluntary review writer, educated in journalism

### **Interviewee #6:**

Age: 25

Gender: male

Level of Education: master's degree in communication

International Background: Dutch

Occupation: freelance writer for gaming websites

Type of organisation they work for: gaming websites  
Sampling criteria: paid review writer, education in communication

**Interviewee #7:**

Age: 24  
Gender: male  
Level of Education: bachelor studies information studies (game development) (no degree yet)  
International Background: Dutch  
Occupation: writer, reviewer  
Type of organisation they work for: gaming website  
Sampling criteria: voluntary review writer, educated in technical game studies

**Interviewee #8:**

Age: 37  
Gender: male  
Level of Education: HBO journalism  
International Background: Dutch  
Occupation: editor in chief, writer  
Type of organisation they work for: gaming websites, local newspaper  
Sampling criteria: paid review writer, educated in journalism

**Interviewee #9:**

Age: 32  
Gender: male  
Level of Education: HBO journalism  
International Background: Dutch  
Occupation: writer, reviewer, columnist  
Type of organisation they work for: broadsheet newspapers, television  
Sampling criteria: paid review writer, educated in journalism

**Interviewee #10:**

Age: 24  
Gender: male  
Level of Education: HBO journalism  
International Background: Dutch  
Occupation: writer and editor  
Type of organisation they work for: gaming website  
Sampling criteria: paid review writer, educated in journalism