

The Fan Effect

Co-production, Communication & Dispute
Between Digital Game Fans, Developers
and Publishers

Tuomas Jalamo

University of Helsinki

Faculty of Social Sciences

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HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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Faculty
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Laitos – Institution – Department
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Abstract

This study analyses the relationship between video game fans, developers and publishers. The topic is approached via a case study that explores online fan reviews of the video game Mass Effect 3 at the Metacritic website. The game had a controversial ending, which was posthumously altered due to negative feedback from the fans. The study seeks to understand the ways in which the case study reflects the issues between the fans and the industry and how these themes are related to the wider discourse of video game fans as active co-producers. Moreover, the study also discusses the ways in which the industry could potentially avoid such negative scenarios as the Mass Effect 3 debacle.

The case study is used to highlight the ways in which fans act as co-producers within modern participation culture and the economy of reputation: the most active individuals are often the most influential and powerful in the online sphere. This is also true in the context of game fandom, where the “core fans” have a significant amount of influence in terms of content-related decisions. To understand this dynamic, this study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis as its methods. The study also speaks for a more transparent and open attitude towards methodologies not commonly utilised in the field of fan studies.

Based on qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study finds that betrayal, ownership and identity are significant themes in the fan reviews. It suggests that the fans felt that Bioware had betrayed them by not staying aesthetically and mechanically consistent with the video game series's earlier outings. Moreover, the prejudices toward both Bioware and the publishing company Electronic Arts played a significant role in the content of the reviews.

In conclusion, the study presents a model of the communication between the video game fans and the industry and suggests that fan feedback is based around four main aspects: mechanic expectations, aesthetic expectations, fan identities and the reputation of the developing and publishing companies within the fan community. Understanding these factors are fundamental in reading the discourse of video game fandom. This study suggests that misreading of these core aspects played an important part in Bioware's failure to communicate with its fans.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

Fan studies, Game studies, Co-production, Participatory culture, Audience research, Video games, Fandom, Fan identities, Mixed methods, User reviews



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma analysoi pelifanien, pelinkehittäjien ja julkaisijoiden välistä suhdetta. Aihetta lähestytään fanien arvosteluja Mass Effect 3 -pelistä Metacritic-sivustolla käsittelevällä tapaustutkimuksella. Peliin tympiintyneet fanit saivat ahkeran painostuksen seurauksena pelin kehittäjäfirma Biowaren julkaisemaan parannellun version teoksen loppuratkaisusta. Tämä tutkielma kartoittaa tapoja, joilla tapaus heijastaa ongelmia pelifanien ja pelinkehittäjien välisessä kommunikaatiossa ja kuinka nämä teemat kytkeytyvät laajempaan diskurssiin pelaajista aktiivisina kanssatuottajina. Lisäksi tutkielma kysyy, kuinka peliteollisuus voisi tulevaisuudessa välttää heikon viestinnän aiheuttamat skenaariot.</p> <p>Tapaustutkimus valottaa läpi tutkielman sitä, kuinka fanit toimivat aktiivisina kanssatuottajina participation culture - ja economy of reputation -kehyksissä. Verkkoympäristöissä aktiivisimmat yksilöt ovat usein vaikutusvaltaisimpia. Tämä pätee myös pelifaniudessa, jossa pieni ja äänekäs vähemmistö käyttää merkittävän suurta valtaa suhteessa pelintekijöihin ja sisältöön liittyviin päätöksiin. Tätä dynamiikkaa lähdetään purkamaan kvalitatiivisen ja kvantitatiivisen sisältöanalyysin keinoin. Samalla tutkielma ottaa kantaa sen puolesta, että fanitutkimus uskaltaisi tieteenalana laajentaa metodologista horisonttiaan.</p> <p>Kvalitatiiviseen ja kvantitatiiviseen analyysiin perustuen tutkielma esittää, että fanien arvioiden keskiössä ovat peteteyksi tulemisen ja omistajuuden kokemukset sekä fani-identiteetteihin liittyvä dynamiikka. Fanit kokivat tulleen Biowaren hylkäämiksi, koska peli ei ollut mekaniikaltaan tai esteettisesti konsistentti pelisarjan aikaisempien osien kanssa. Lisäksi suurta roolia fanien reaktioissa näyttelivät ennakoasenteet niin Biowarea kuin pelin julkaisijaa Electronic Artsia kohtaan.</p> <p>Tutkimus esittelee tuloksena mallin, joka hahmottaa tärkeimpiä aspekteja fanien ja välisessä kommunikaatiossa. Sen mukaan pelifanien palaute rakentuu neljän pääaspektin ympärille: pelimekaniikkaan liittyvät odotukset, esteettiset odotukset, fani-identiteetit, sekä pelin kehittäjän ja julkaisijan maine faniyhteisössä. Näiden aspektien ymmärtäminen on äärimmäisen tärkeää pelifanidiskurssin luennassa. Tutkimus esittää, että näihin tekijöihin liittyvät väärintulkinnat näyttelivät suurta roolia siinä, miksi Biowaren yritykset kommunikoida faniensa kanssa tilanteessa epäonnistuivat.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords Fanitutkimus, pelitutkimus, osallistava kulttuuri, yleisötutkimus, videopelit, fanius, fani-identiteetit, mixed methods, käyttäjäarvot			

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“In this new landscape of video games, cell phones, podcasts, blogging, instant messaging and other kinds of media-intensive experiences, children are participants – not spectators, not even consumers in the traditional sense of the term. They are actively shaping the media.”

- Henry Jenkins, researcher

“Gamers are the worst fucking people.”

- Phil Fish, former video game designer

1. Introduction

Should video game audiences be seen primarily as customers, fans or even active co-producers of the content by the game developers and marketers? The question is very topical in the light of recent developments in both online fan activism and trends in business practices related to review scores and audience feedback. As it stands, the relationship between developers and their audience is far from unproblematic and poses questions about the way video game industry is constantly being shaped by this discourse. This study seeks to understand the said relationship and the way it is constantly negotiated within the cultural practices of digital gaming. The shaping of this discourse is particularly exciting because video games as a medium is arguably still seeking its identity amongst other, more established cousins such as film or television. As we are about to see, fandom as both a type of consumerism and marketing strategy plays an extremely important role in how the current state of fan/industry relationship has and continues to develop.

This study approaches the topic via a case study that quite tellingly illustrates the complexities of the developer-fan relationship. One of the most anticipated big-budget releases of 2012 was Mass Effect 3, a science fiction role-playing game developed by the Canadian company Bioware. Upon its release, the game was met with high praise from the gaming press. According to the review website Metacritic the “metascore” (the weighted average review score of the game) of both the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360 versions of the game totalled 93 out of 100, which in the site’s own terms translates to “universal acclaim”.¹

However, compared to the professional critics, many fans of the series were not pleased with the final chapter of their beloved trilogy. The most troublesome aspect for the gamers seemed to be the ending, which many felt offered no real conclusion to many aspects of the story, did not provide enough variation in the

¹ <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/mass-effect-3>

possible outcomes, and felt inconsistent. This discontent led to various online campaigns that demanded Bioware to make changes to the ending. Arguably the most notable of these was the “Retake Mass Effect” campaign, a petition that raised over \$76,000 to charity to draw attention to the cause (Brown 2012).

The fans’ fingers were pointed not only at Bioware but also at the game’s publisher Electronic Arts (abbreviated as EA). This was no wonder: in the years prior to the Mass Effect debacle, the company had already gained bad reputation due to the media coverage that painted the company as a cruel meritocracy demanding 90-hour weeks of their team members (Dyer-Whiteford & de Peuter 2009, 35-39). In terms of influencing decisions related to content, EA has also been blamed by the fans for “dumbing down” the game franchises it had acquired in order to make them more appealing to general audiences. (Usher 2012). The issues in both working conditions and business practices resulted the company to have the questionable honour of winning The Consumerist’s infamous “Worst Company in America” award two years in a row in 2012 and 2013 (Goldfarb 2013). Thus, the stage had already been set for the EA ending up being portrayed as a greedy entity that favours easy money in favour of creativity.

Following the outcry, Bioware’s co-founder Ray Muzyka (2012) wrote an open letter written in response to the fans. In it, he stated the following: “Mass Effect 3 concludes a trilogy with so much player control and ownership of the story that it was hard for us to predict the range of emotions players would feel when they finished playing through it”. Moreover, Muzyka emphasised that he wanted to defend the “artistic integrity” of the developers but promised that measures had been taken to address the issues the fans had with the released product.

In April 2012, the company announced that new extended endings for the game would be made available as a free download.² Surely then, the outcome of the

² <http://investor.ea.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=662095>

Mass Effect 3 debacle was a great victory for fans in what Johnson (2007) calls an infinite series of “ongoing struggle over interpretation and evaluation” (286). Or was it? As we will discover, fan studies in the various phases of their short history has both positioned the fans as active re-shapers of the capitalist discourse and, on the other hand, questioned such thinking by studying the ways in which the culture of fandom is in many ways also means of maintaining “the existing economic, social and cultural status quo” (Grey, Sandwoss & Harrington 2007, 3-4). This problematic duality is very much in play in the Mass Effect 3 debacle. This study argues that by protesting and demanding changes to the content fans are simultaneously using power over and being commodified by the video game industry.

This study argues that by examining the reception of ME3 before and after the release of the new ending DLC (short for Downloadable Content), it is possible to make sense of many important aspects in the multi-layered relationship between fans and video game makers. The research questions are as follows: how does the fan feedback of Mass Effect 3 reflect the issues in the relationship between video game fans, developers and publishers? How are these issues related to the wider discourse of video game fans as active co-producers of content? How could the negative shifts in fan feedback be prevented?

1.1 Why video game fans?

Video games as a medium had their major breakthrough in the 1980s, when the first home video game consoles became available and successful (Mäyrä 2008, 58-61). Even though the history of the medium is relatively short, quite a lot has happened during this time. Video games as a medium now hosts a number of established genres (shooters, platformers, beat-‘em-ups, strategy games, RPGs etc.), all with their distinctive features and even a variety of sub-genres.

Throughout the decades that followed the first wave of home video consoles, companies such as Nintendo, Sega, Sony turned the digital games business into mainstream entertainment (Ibid., 58-61). Over the course of last few decades, digital games have grown into a multi billion dollar entertainment industry at staggering speed. These days, the biggest AAA titles are created with budgets that match the most ludicrously expensive blockbuster movies. And the money flows to both directions: games such as the Call of Duty series and Grand Theft Auto V have broken records as the biggest-selling entertainment launches of all time (Lynch 2013).

In the year 2016, the rising trends in the industry included virtual reality and eSports, as well as watching others play and engaging in conversation at services such as Twitch and YouTube. Perhaps more than ever, gamers seek to actively take part in all aspects of the act of gaming. (Vellanki 2016.) What is especially noteworthy in this age of YouTubers and lucrative eSports events, is that being a video game fan has become increasingly more diverse than simply purchasing and playing the games. The social aspects of gaming – and indeed game fandom – have taken interesting new forms, all of which seem to build upon the idea of the fan being both a spectator and an active participant. In terms of identity politics, this is especially intriguing: the fans have increasingly more opportunities to reinforce their gamer identities, even when they are not holding the controller.

Some studies approach playing video games as a “performative” practice: the player is at the same time a spectator and a performer (Crawford & Rutter 2007). Gosling and Crawford (2011, 141-142) on the other hand, suggest that video game audiences should perhaps be seen as a “scene” – a concept often utilised in studies of music fans. Indeed, video game fandom sits very comfortably amongst cultures where individuals have the power of “elective belongings” – the possibility to build one’s identity by voluntarily joining social groups that have their own distinct features (Ibid., citing Longhurst 2007).

In terms of fan studies video game audiences are a fascinating object of study, because their position in relation to the industry is so unstable and in a constant state of change. The video game industry is arguably the first entertainment industry of its magnitude that is deeply rooted in creating the illusion of interactivity. What is more, it seems obvious that gaming audiences are very much accustomed to and invested in the culture of co-production in the post-Web 2.0 world. As we are about to uncover, their actions are shaped by both the development of fan cultures in the few previous decades, and the new technologies, which modern video games are very much a part of.

1.2 Fans and co-production

The central arguments of this study build on topics debated over throughout the history of fan studies: consumerism/co-production, power relations of the fans and the industry, as well as technology's role in the change of fandom. This chapter offers a brief overview of fan studies as well as definitions for the central concepts of the study.

How to define fandom? For the purposes of this study, it is best to approach fandom as structurally very loose, voluntary and temporary communities where the common denominator is the object of interest (Kovala & Saesma 2003, 15). The history of academic fan studies shows that not only has the term been approached from various, often contradictory standpoints, but also that fandom as a concept is closely tied to the way media audiences act as consumers and how the industry has in turn has responded to those changes. (Grey, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007.) This study, from the point of view of the research questions, approaches fandom as a form of co-production. To elaborate on this definition, a short overview of the history of the academic debate around the topic is necessary.

Grey, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007, 2) divide the short history of fan studies – and indeed the history of how fandom itself has been understood in the academic circles – into three phases. The first of these phases was heavily influenced by Henry Jenkins’ 1992 work *Textual Poachers*.

Considered widely to be one of the most influential works of the field, Jenkins’s (1992) central argument is that fans are indeed a much more complex entity than the stereotypes would lead one to believe. At the time Jenkins wrote the book, fans were often portrayed as either dangerously obsessed fanatics, who devoted their lives to things deemed as essentially trivial. Worse still, fans were often seen as consumers of the most mindless kind who would without hesitation purchase nearly anything that was somehow related to their object of fandom. Jenkins contested this view by suggesting that fans were in fact a rather different kind of force, one that would not passively succumb to the spoon-fed ways of experiencing media, but rather actively developed alternative ways of interpreting, making sense of and evaluating the content – hence the metaphor or poachers.

Largely due to the influence of Jenkins’ work, the first wave of fan studies was largely concerned about the misinformed labelling of fans as “the Others” by the media. The idea was to deconstruct the image of fans as easy, zombie-like targets for marketers and instead present them as a group that actively shaped the content they were so fond of and made it their own. According to many scholars of this first phase, the fact that the intended meanings of the works were creatively re-interpreted by fans made them the exact opposite of the common stereotype of socially awkward, passive consumers. (Grey et. al 2007, 3-4.)

During what the authors call the second wave of fan studies, the field took a step away from the paradigm of “fans battling the power bloc”, and instead saw

the discourse within fan culture as reflections and continuations of wider social hierarchies. In these works, fandom, and indeed popular culture as a whole was no longer seen as a platform for emancipation but rather as a structure that underlined the already existing socio-economical capital. (ibid., 6-7.)

Due to technological developments, the way we consume media products today is drastically different from what it was during the first phases of fan studies. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006, 3) seeks to describe this change and its possible implications. He suggests that we now live in the world where media content breaks the boundaries of both countries and mediums. This has led to the birth of a media culture where audiences are both active participants and media producers.

Traditionally, fans have been among the first to adapt to new technologies (Jenkins 2006b, 137-138). These days however, they are no longer necessarily represented as a minority group of strangely-behaving, heavily obsessed audience. The third wave of fan studies approaches modern fandom as a mode of consumption integrated into “the fabric of our everyday lives” (Grey et. al 2007, 8-9). From this standpoint, it is no wonder that for media industries, fandom as a mode of being emotionally attached to a media product is the single most important building block of marketing, communicating and negotiating with the consumers. Video game fans are most likely to be the most tech-savvy of all the big media industry audiences today, and thus it is no wonder that marketers approach them as the forerunners of this new kind of exchange.

As we can see, the definition for fans and fandom has changed quite drastically within a relatively short time frame. Depending on context, fandom can be seen as an activity of showing ritualistic affection towards a media text, a means to challenge and reshape the hegemonic meanings of media products, a way to reinforce existing social hierarchies and an all-encompassing way of consuming

media in this day and age. Fans, on the other hand, can be approached as both the “ideal consumers” and a rebellious, unmanageable audience in a never-ending battle against the industry that unsuccessfully tries to define the meanings of media content for them. What is common for all the definitions however, is that they all in one way or another address the idea of fans as people who at least seek to take part in the process of cultural production.

In *Playing Fans. Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (2015, 4-5), a more recent work in the field of fan studies, Paul Booth suggests that to make things even more complicated, fans and media industries are in fact not so much opposing forces as they are increasingly intertwined entities. The industry, Booth argues, utilises and mimics fannish behaviour as a form of marketing. Similarly, due to their increasing role as not only spectators but also as media producers, “textual gatekeepers” and “fanboy auteurs”, fans too take part in industry practices.

Booth (Ibid., 1-5) suggests that fandom should first and foremost be “understood as continual, shifting negotiation and dialogue within already-extant industrial relations”. Therefore, it would be beneficial to move the focus of study to “specific sites and moments of interaction” and “play” between fans and the industry. This study seeks to apply this perspective to the Mass Effect case study. Jenkins’ influence also echoes strongly throughout the following chapters, mostly as an intellectual foundation for approaching the discourse of fans as active participants in the exchange between themselves and the industry.

Of course, not only fans take part in the co-production of culture. Meyer (2008, 68) notes that indeed any cultural consumer is never simply “using up” the cultural products, but is simultaneously engaged in making sense of these products, and thus, in the act of producing meanings. Fandom then, must be understood as a mode of cultural consumerism that is especially and often

consciously invested in the co-production of both meanings and the material itself.

1.3 The material: Metacritic user reviews

Metacritic³ is a website that collects professional reviews from various selected sources and, based on this, counts a “metascore” for any given popular media product. The review categories include movies, music, television shows and video games.

Recently, Metacritic has provoked discussion about the surprisingly direct power it possesses in relation to the video game industry. Game journalist Jason Schreier (2015) suggests that website has an enormous influence on practically every major video game developer in the world. Contracts between publishers and developers increasingly often include a hefty bonus that is only paid to the employees of the developing company if the finished game manages to gain a high enough Metascore. Consequently, developers are under the pressure to create not simply products they feel are of high quality, but also include or exclude certain features based on the effect they may have on the Metascore.

In this respect, the economy of reputation is likely to influence the development of the whole medium. Jenkins (2011) suggests that in historical context, digital games have entered a phase where they have begun gaining a higher cultural status – much like movies and comic books before them, they are a lively new art form that has the power to question, challenge and re-shape the ways of their more established counterparts. However, the idea of games as a creative medium is compromised if it remains burdened by a system that celebrates homogeneity and predictability veiled in the idea of “giving the fans what they want” (Schreier 2015).

³ www.metacritic.com

The user reviews on Metacritic thus offer an intriguing window to the core of the relationship between fans, developers and publishers. This study analyses two sets of Metacritic customer reviews: the first set contains the reviews submitted just after the release of the game, whereas the second set includes the reviews submitted after the release of the new ending DLC. This lets us examine how, if at all, the reactions of the fans changed after Bioware gave in to their demands. Even more importantly, the user reviews offer an interesting look to how the fans take part in the discourse, and how they actively shape it by actively creating and enforcing meanings.

Metacritic serves as a great source of material for our purposes, since because it serves as an important meeting point between all stakeholders in the discourse: the publishers, the developers, the intermediaries and finally, the fans. Thus, it represents the aforementioned “site of interaction” (Booth 2015, 5) of this study.

The focus of this study is twofold: on one hand, answering the research questions requires an in-depth study of the fans’ reviews: how is their relationship to the industry reflected in their writings? On the other hand, we are interested in what “went wrong” in the case of Mass Effect 3. Thus, we need to examine what kind of impact the industry’s reaction to the outcry had on the fans. Thus the method of researching the Metacritic reviews, further explained in the third chapter, combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The first one helps to examine the way the fans make sense of their position in the discourse and the latter supports it by comparing how much the reactions changed after Bioware made their move by releasing the new ending DLC.

1.4 The structure of this study

This study begins with a theory chapter examining the relationship of the fans and the industry, as well as the stereotypes and frictions inside the fan culture. Moreover, this chapter presents the concept of the “economy of reputation” that forms a backdrop for my analysis. The third chapter delves deeper to the mixed methods approach of this study and the reasoning behind these methodological choices. Moreover, the methodology chapter explains how the quantitative data was collected and how this supports the qualitative analysis. Finally, the fifth chapter draws conclusions from the analysis and presents a model to approach the gamer-developer discourse in further studies – whilst providing a valuable starting point for anyone interested in developing a deeper understanding of the topic, including the game companies themselves. The sixth chapter closes the study with a discussion of further implications of the findings in this study, as well as a summary about how fan activism has changed – and how this could be taken into account by the game industry.

2. Economy of reputation, participation culture, social influence & the relationship of the industry and gamers

This chapter takes a closer look at the concepts of participatory culture and the economy of reputation that form the theoretical backbone of this study. Furthermore, it discusses the social influence in fan communication and explores the background, common stereotypes and tensions behind the relationship of our key players: fans, developers and publishers.

2.1 Participatory culture

The way video game fans behave and express themselves in online social spheres is in many ways an exemplary manifestation of the “participatory culture” phenomenon. Jenkins (2009, xi) describes participatory culture as

a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created).

Online environments enable all this in a whole new way in the form of social media, podcasting, blogging, message boards, modding etc (Ibid., xi-xii). Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson (2013, 4-6) trace the origins of the modern participatory culture back to the emergence of the personal computers boom and ARPANET, the precursor of the Internet. The phenomenon gained even more momentum in the subsequent decades when the graphical web browsers made browsing the Internet easy for anyone and, finally platforms such as

Blogger lowered the bar for publishing content significantly as well. This was of course followed by the explosive success of social networks. It is no wonder that video game fans have adopted to the idea of participatory culture so easily. The timeline of participatory culture mirrors that of the home video game systems. Because video game fandom has been so closely tied to both the development of and the technologies associated with participatory culture, it is particularly intuitive to discuss the two together.

Participatory culture is often mentioned in the same breath as the concept of “Web 2.0”. Although arguably now a slightly outdated buzzword, it was widely used to describe the ideological shift to approaching web as a platform from the early 00s on. The attention moved from software to services – for which the users would pay “directly or indirectly” (O’Reilly 2007). In *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006, 11-12), Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams declared that the era of the “read-only” Internet was over, and the world had taken a step towards “age of participation”. The authors go on to suggest that

(a)s these effects permeate out through the economy and intersect with deep structural changes like globalisation, we will witness the rise of an entirely new kind of economy where firms coexist with millions of autonomous producers who connect and cocreate value in loosely coupled networks. We call this the collaboration society. (Ibid. 32.)

Even though the statement quite aptly predicts the rise social networks and their importance to the global economy, it also seems somewhat overtly celebratory and optimistic about audiences as “autonomous producers” working together with companies. Booth (2015, 8) for example, suggests using caution in seeing the power of digital technologies as simply “good” or “bad”, and proclaims that instead it always contains elements that are deeply contradictory by nature. While social networks offer the individuals a chance to create and share content

and opinions more easily, they simultaneously enable the industries to exploit those same users as commodities.

2.2 The economy of reputation

One way of approaching the emergence of Web 2.0 is that it created a perfect backdrop for the new model of communication between the industry and the fans where audiences' demands have a rather direct effect on content creators. Surely the rise of the culture that promises media audiences democratic channels of feedback with a low barrier to entry means that the fans indeed have more power than ever before? Not necessarily.

The problem with the logic lies in the way the dialogue between the parties is embedded in the structure of what Alison Hearn (2010, 422-423) calls "the digital reputation economy". The legacy of Web 2.0, Hearn suggests, has created a complex economy where immaterial and intangible "reputation" serves as a sort of currency for both companies and individual consumers. Reputation in this context is best understood as a visible digital footprint of an individual in various social networks, combined with the determination to frequently express one's opinions and feelings online. For companies, hiring persons with "higher degrees of social capital" means a better chance to succeed in the market. Moreover, the number of prolific individuals expressing their opinions on media products further increases their visibility and reputation.

Although social media is sometimes celebrated as a platform that democratises self-expression, the problem is that in the economy of reputation, the consumers, often unbeknownst to themselves, also take part in what is best described as free labour. The information that the media companies gain from the vast amount of data that people share of their interests and tastes is something that the marketing departments of yesteryear could only dream of.

Moreover, the situation has created a market for agencies whose business model is based on working as intermediaries between the brands and the consumers. These agencies measure the reputation of the product for companies and thus provide information based on which the companies can further develop their products. (Hearn 2010, 427-428.) Thus, the reputation economy creates further opportunities for these intermediaries to use power to shape the market by defining the rules according to which the value of any given brand or media product is measured. In the context of video game culture, the Metacritic can indeed be approached as one of such intermediaries. Fans, on the other hand, are heavily invested in the process of co-production, but their effort is also financially beneficial for the game companies. Thus, within this dynamic, the power relations between the parties largely depend on the chosen perspective. The contradictory nature of the relationship between the gamers and the industry colors the debate over Mass Effect 3 in intriguing ways, as the later chapters will show.

In the reputation economy, the individuals who produce the most content often have the most influence. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand how this social influence works. In psychology, there have been numerous attempts to form a functional theory on how social impact works – most notably Bibb Latané's social impact theory from 1981 (Nowak, Szamrej & Latané 1990, 363) and its improved version, dynamic social impact theory from 1996 (Harton & Bullock 2007, 521-522). The theory suggests that cultural preferences are born from the influence within groups – those closer to each other will have a greater impact on each other (Ibid. 522-523). Dynamic social impact theory places emphasis on regional differences and is thus based on geographic factors.

2.3 Social influence in fan communication

Just how well the social impact theory translates to non-physical environments has been a source of debate. Harton & Bullock (2007, 533-534) nearly completely dismiss the role of the online environment in the dynamic social impact theory by comparing the Internet with the telephone, which was believed to diminish the effect of physical distance as well when it was introduced – and failed to do so. The comparison, however, seems wildly inaccurate given how effective the Internet has proven to be in forming virtual communities. Since many of the behavioural patterns within the online communities inescapably stem from their physical counterparts, it would seem inaccurate to claim that social impact does not play a significant part in the communities of cyberspace as well. As Nikunen (2008, 188) notes, Internet communities, just as their physical counterparts, have their own social hierarchies and rules.

Johnson (2007, 287-291 citing Jenkins and Tulloch 1995) observe how fan communities always seek an “unified interpretative position” – when there is dispute over whether, for example, a season of a television show is good or bad, a great amount of effort is used to make the voice of the community as unified as possible. When fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* had differing opinions about the sixth season of the series, the rest of the community did their best to make the opposing view canon by both expressing their views very vocally on online message boards, separating those who enjoyed the season from the “true fans”. In time, the community’s general opinion about the season shifted towards the “official”, generally accepted view. What was common for the both opposing camps here was that both seemed to feel it was important for the fans to form a somewhat singular, community opinion of the season.

Fan communities then, are no strangers to the effects of social impact. As we are about to see, the user reviews of this study show interesting trends in this

regard when comparing the topics of discussion between the two sets of interviews before and after the release of the new ending DLC.

2.4 Game developers as auteurs and businessmen

The video game industry can be said to roughly consist of four main actors: developers, publishers, licensors and distributors. This study focuses on the fans' relationship with the first two. Developing a game involves the planning and technical implementation of the game. The publisher, on the other hand is responsible for financing, promotion and manufacturing of the product. It is to be noted that game companies can engage in either one or several of these four "core activities". (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter 2009, 39-40.)

Some publishers are also developers, but for many developing companies, it makes sense to make deals with the publishing companies since their own resources are not necessarily sufficient enough to handle the publishing side of the business in addition to the development. The details of the contracts between developers and publishers of course vary. But the main dynamic between the two remains the same: publishers invest in developers and hope that the resulting product sells well, so that the investment remains profitable. This relationship has led to heated discussions about the publishers' power to make drastic content-related decisions — either directly or indirectly. Thus, the discussion often revolves around rationalisation versus creativity. (Tschang 2007.)

To better understand the tension in the discourse between developers, publishers and fans, it is important to take a closer look at the history of what it means to be a video game maker. It can be argued that from very early on, the video game industry has recognised the concept of game developers as highly individual, creative and even anarchistic professionals. In the documentary film

Atari: Game Over (Burns & Jak 2014), game industry pioneer Manny Gerard recalls how at Atari, one of the first video game companies, the philosophy was that “these guys did what they wanted to do”. The engineers were treated like rock stars. The company wanted to attract bright young minds, and thus creative freedom, regular parties and a liberal policy with illicit substances was a logical business move.

Interestingly enough, in the 1980s Electronic Arts shared very much the same kind of values as Atari. Before becoming one of the biggest monoliths in the digital entertainment business, EA was founded on the idea that its software engineers were artists and should be treated as such – the very name of the company stems from that idea. Former company executive Bing Gordon reminisces the early days of the company by stating that aside from Electronic Arts, “(n)obody was thinking of games or software as art (...) If you could name the company as the category, we would have massive power.” However, after Electronic Arts grew bigger, its ideals of treating the developers like rock stars slowly disappeared and made way to philosophies closer to that of other multi-billion dollar entertainment enterprises. (Campbell 2015.)

From this perspective, it is important to note how the path of Electronic Arts and Bioware crossed some years before the release of *Mass Effect 3* in the form of a buyout. This is highly important in terms of what both companies represented to the fans. Founded in 1995, Bioware soon became an industry darling of both critics and players. Role-playing games with deep mechanics and vast stories that allowed players to “explore them in their own terms” and had “plenty of room for individuals to have unique experiences” (Fahms 2010). Thus, Bioware built a solid reputation as a developer focused on experiences that were slightly more complex and sophisticated than many of their mainstream counterparts. As the company was bought by Electronic Arts in 2007, many fans were concerned that teaming up with the corporate giant would affect the quality of Bioware’s outings (Ashcraft 2007). Thus, the attitudes reflected in the *Mass*

Effect 3 debacle had begun formulating years before the game appeared on the shelves.

If the video game industry has its businessmen, it certainly has its auteur figures as well. Hideo Kojima, the father of the Metal Gear Solid series, and Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto were among the first game designers to gain a cult following resembling the most prolific film directors — In 1996, Time Magazine called Miyamoto "The Spielberg of Video Games" (Jackson 1996). Kojima, on the other hand, was named as one of the most important people of the year in 2002 by Newsweek (Hermida 2002), and compared to the author Jonathan Franzen, scriptwriter David Chase and film director Peter Jackson (Itoi 2001).

Arguably, the status of game developers as artists and indeed celebrities has only strengthened during the recent years in the wake of the "rise of the indie developer" (Parker, 2011). Small studios of only a handful of people are making sometimes extremely successful games, and the developers are often regarded as 'visionaries' and heroes who almost single-handedly create these experiences. (Cullimore 2015)

In a culture like this, it is hardly surprising that many game developers do not see themselves as mere engineers, but rather as creative artists. This sometimes creates tension between the developers and the more business-oriented stakeholders of the industry. As our case study will show, this also applies to the developers' relationship with the fans.

2.5 The stereotypes and identity politics of video game fans

In the *Textual Poachers* anniversary interview with Scott (2013, xxi), Jenkins notes that because fandom is such a rapidly changing phenomenon, he would thus prefer if his earlier work was read by modern audiences as a product of its

time. Most importantly, the book was written before the technological turn in the form of Internet culture. For this reason, Jenkins feels that even the poaching metaphor has lost some of its relevance, and would rather talk about participatory culture as a more accurate way of describing the complex relationship between the industries and audiences.

In many ways however, many of the book's observations about the relationship between fans and content creators, as well as common stereotypes about fans and fandom, still ring true – also when it comes to video game fandom. Jenkins (1992, 9-11) uses William Shatner's appearance in a 1986 Saturday Night Live comedy skit as an example of the common representation of fans. In the sketch Shatner, frustrated by the fans' overtly detailed questions and ridiculous appearance, asks a participant if he has "ever kissed a girl" and advises the group of nerds to go and "get a life".

Although this portrayal of fandom feels rather archaic now, it still seems to be prevalent, curiously enough, in depictions of certain kinds of fandom. In the interview by Scott (2013, xv-xvi), Jenkins elaborates on this idea by pointing out that in popular culture, fans of rock or sports are often still portrayed as somehow more "capable" than characters whose objects of fandom are science fiction or comics. *Big Bang Theory* – a hit television series about a group of nerds, still draws its jokes about stereotypes of nerds "living in their mother's basement" and not generally being able to form intimate relationships.

The common stereotypes of video game fans, in many respects, bear resemblance to the same kind of representation of fandom. The cult television show *South Park* features an episode called "Make Love, Not Warcraft" (McCulloch & Parker 2007), which portrays an avid player of the popular MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) *World of Warcraft* as an overweight, amoeba-like character who spends so much time with the game that even the developers are having a hard time believing it. "We're dealing with

someone who has absolutely no life,” one character notes during the course of the episode.

This stereotype of gaming as a culturally “juvenile”, non-intelligent, waste-of-time activity for predominantly white male audiences still lives strong, as Adrienne Shaw’s (2011, 38) ethnographic study, among others, has shown. For her study, Shaw interviewed a diverse group of video game hobbyists with the purpose of finding out whether or not they would label themselves and “gamers”. The answers showed that even though gaming audiences are more diverse than ever, “gamer” as a label holds certain negative connotations of the gamer stereotypes that held many interviewees back from publicly displaying their “gamer identity”.

In addition, in her earlier work Shaw (2010, 407-408) also writes about another trend among scholars and journalists: the persistence of trying to prove that modern gamers are not “who we think they are”. The underlying thought is that these days, games have are made for a much wider audience and has finally broken free of its limited, male-dominant cultural origins. However, the problem with this approach is that the imagined past of video games as entertainment for teenage boys is a construction as well – and not necessarily true. Nevertheless, this way of thinking has arguably solidified the idea of “true gamers” as a group mostly consisting of people who fit the original stereotype. This also likely partly explains why the people in Shaw’s interviews who play video games find it difficult to call themselves “gamers”.

2.6 Hierarchies within video game fandom

A trend in the reviews that is perhaps not as obvious as the last two has to do with identities and the cultural hierarchy within the gaming culture. As we have seen, the identity of a “gamer” has cultural connotations that makes many

people who play video games reject such a label (Shaw 2011). However, there are also certain hierarchies at play within the gaming culture that have an effect on how the fans respond to developers' choices.

To elaborate, a study by Stanfill (2013) provides a rather interesting theory about the inner workings of fan hierarchies. According to a series of interviews conducted by the author, even though fandom may have become "a model for the new ideal active media consumer", fans themselves do not necessarily see themselves as such – in fact, they often seem to distance themselves from certain kinds of fandom. This creates a situation where fans often speak ill of "wrong kinds" of fans and rationalise it by utilising the old stereotypes of such fans being "losers".

Such hierarchies within fan cultures are interesting, because not only do they reveal that fandom as a phenomenon is everything but unified or universally accepted even within the fan cultures themselves (Ibid., 118) – they also define the frame within which the fans feel comfortable in terms of content. Once the content seems to be directed to the despised kind of fans, a protest of the "old school" fans is likely to ensue. The Mass Effect series is, without a doubt, mainstream entertainment: the sales numbers of Mass Effect 3 made it one of the biggest entertainment launches of the year 2012 (Mitchell 2012). Judging by the user reviews however, it is clear that the fans are keen on differentiating themselves from what is perceived, at the very least, as the wrong kind of mainstream.

A very popular discussion among game fans at the moment is the perceived trend of "dumbing down" games in order to appeal to wider audiences. The common argument is that by trying to copy the Hollywood strategies of big blockbuster movies to the gaming world, the price the game industry pays is that mainstream games are becoming less sophisticated, both gameplay- and content-wise. (Weinblatt 2014.) Arguably, The Call of Duty series by Activision in

particular has become a symbol for such critique. This applies to making generalisations about the game's audience too. Game developer John Gibson stated in an interview that COD's simplified, "on the rails" nature has "ruined a generation of FPS (First-Person Shooter) players" because in his experience, they cannot appreciate the complexities offered by games that feature mechanics that place a stronger emphasis on player skill (Lahti 2013). The term "on the rails" that Gibson refers to is a mocking phrase commonly associated with the Hollywoodisation of the games culture – so much so that the established British game developer Peter Molyneux had to underline that the style of his unfinished game he was showing to the press in 2011 at the E3 conference was definitely not going to be "on rails" in its final release version, when he realised that the demo gave the journalists a rather straightforward impression (Donato 2011). In other words, while one part of the blockbuster video game culture seems to embrace the idea of these "dumbed-down, on-the-rails" experiences, another part works really hard to not be associated with this kind of approach.

2.7 Video game fans as creative participants

The stereotype of a "gamer" influences the communication between fans and developers in a number of ways that are of interest in the context of this study. Let us briefly return to Booth (2015, 15-16), who argues that as opposed to antagonistic, modern fan practices are better described as "playful." Fans are not in direct opposition of the industry, Booth explains, but rather "(b)oth fans and the media industries (role-)play in the spaces and sites of the other". What is more, the negotiation in the discourse between fans and media industries are often played out in the form of parody (Ibid., 21).

This is certainly true in the case of video game culture: to make their voices heard, game fans, as we will see in the analysis chapter later on, creatively

utilise the stereotypical representations of the industry as a soulless entity that favours financial profit to staying “true to the fans”. The textual strategies in the negative reviews for Mass Effect 3 based on stereotypes of developers and publishers thus serve as an example of how the idea of “playing” with the roles within the discourse indeed works both ways.

But why are video game fans so exceptionally active as audiences? It has been suggested that the gamers’ strong urge to take part in all aspects of the game culture is not only linked to fandom, but also to the nature of digital gameplay itself. Crawford and Rutter (2007, 276-279 citing Rehak 2003 & Mactavish 2003) describe the act of gaming as “performative”, and note how it often extends “beyond the in-game experience” as various social practices – from sharing the experience with their peers to modding games by reprogramming them to create new versions of the game. Because of the strong social, communal and reproductive aspects of gaming, it can be argued that playing video games resembles fanlike activities almost by default. For better or worse, the idea of participation seems to be a built-in feature within gaming culture.

2.8 How the game industry approaches its audiences

Digital games industry has evolved together with the first home computers all the way to the internet era, participatory culture and beyond. This is reflected in the way the digital game fans are extremely adept at modifying, re-imagining and reshaping the objects of their fandom, as well as making their voices heard via myriad of channels available for them online. In chapter 2, we discussed how this development is closely tied to the concept of digital reputation economy. As the example of Metacritic’s power in chapter 1 showed, the video game industry makes constant efforts to base many of their common business practices around the feedback from players. The industry uses the “free labor” of fans to create products whose performance sales-wise is as easy to predict

as possible. And yet, the flip side of this is that it is impossible to deny the tremendous power that video games have over the industry. The Mass Effect debacle is of course a valid example of this, but it is by no means a sole manifestation of just how much video game fans' actions have direct consequences.

In 2013, Phil Fish, an indie game developer who had just released his first, greatly anticipated game *Fez* declared on Twitter that he would quit making games altogether. The reason for this was a long series of arguments that Fish had online with both fans and games journalists. Fish was known in the gaming community for his snarky and sometimes mean-spirited comments on the state of both video game culture and gamers. Even many of those who sympathised with Fish were first to admit that the tempered game designer could have handled his public outbursts better. (Rougeau 2013.) However, the fact that Fish was essentially harassed to death speaks volumes of the power that the game audiences possess in terms of direct results. Even after Fish's resignation from the gaming world, his personal information was leaked online by hackers who targeted his company's website and social media accounts (McWerthor 2014).

When developers and marketers talk about video game fans, they often do it in a way that evokes a strong sense of community. In his open apology letter to the Mass Effect fans, Bioware's Muzyka (2012) writes about how important it is for the company to do their very best for their "core fans".

Interestingly enough, Phil Fish makes the claim in a 2012 interview (Rev3Games, 2012) that the term "core gamer" is almost always used to describe a *certain kind* of video game fan – usually a fan of "just the games where they kill people". Fish also criticises the exclusivity of the term "gamer" and feels it can potentially drive people off of the hobby who do not feel they connect with the perceived identity of being a gamer.

It is indeed difficult to define exactly who the “core fans” are – is a core fan someone who spends the most time with a game, or simply someone who is passionate enough to voice their opinions about it publicly? Nevertheless, it seems that developers and publishers spend a great deal of money and energy to please this extremely loosely defined portion of their audiences. It is interesting to see that this group of fans who are often most active in online discussions (i.e. have the highest amount of “currency” in the reputation economy) not only have the power to form the official “fan opinion” of a game, but are also highly influential in terms of what aspects of the game are the hot topics of the discussion in the first place. We have seen this in the case of *Mass Effect 3* in this study: between the release of the game and the DLC, the ending became the most dominant topic, almost to the point where it was difficult to talk about the game without expressing at least some kind of an opinion about it. This is discursive power in its purest form – the power to decide what is important and what is not.

All this leads us to the observation that gaming fans are indeed not created equal. The video game industry’s practices are most heavily influenced by the segment of the audience that speaks the loudest. Whether this segment can be truly said to represent video game fans as a whole is open for debate. What is clear from the industry practices is that this segment of players is equally exploited (by making games specifically designed for the “core gamer” tastes in order to secure good sales figures) and feared by the industry.

The need to please the core fans can be seen as heightened awareness in the practices of video game companies. In 2016, Polish game studio CD Project Red released *Witcher 3*, a role-playing game that became one of the biggest sellers of the year. The studio declared they aimed to have a “gamer-centric value proposition” as a marketing strategy for the game. (Leone 2016.) The retail box of the game included a thank you letter to the fans and throughout the first year after the game’s release, the company released new content for free –

and most of it was directly based on players' feedback. All this resulted in what was hailed as "a shining example of how post-launch support and DLC should work in an industry where the relationship between gamer and game developer feels increasingly antagonistic." (Koch 2016.)

However, all this comes at the cost of the fans being represented as angry and potentially sulky people, whom the developers and publishers need to appease with free gifts and obedience. It would not be unreasonable to call the dynamics of the relationship one-sided – and answering the situation with simply placing even more emphasis on fan service may not be a viable solution.

The problems of the current way of concentrating to enforce the "core fan" approach in the dialogue between developers and gamers demonstrates that the industry should seek to recognise and activate player groups from outside the core fans to join in the conversation. In the long run, this would quite likely create new audience segments and offer more creative freedom to developers. Arguably, this has already begun happening with the rise of indie games and mobile games – genres that arguably both attract their own type of audiences that differ from big budget console and PC games.

2.7 Fandom in the age of the DLC

Booth (2010, 4) argues that one of the defining characteristics of New Media is its updatability – instead of static, unchangeable products, they are better described as "cultural processes". This is especially true in the case of modern video games.

The so-called seventh video game console generation that began in 2005 with the release of Xbox 360 was defined by the online capabilities of the consoles, which also led to the rise of downloadable content for the games. Of course, PC

games had a longer history of downloadable add-ons, but the seventh generation marked the spot where they became the norm for consoles, too. (Carrillo 2015.)

Perhaps it is not surprising that the generation during which video game fans became most vocal in their demands to make alterations to the games' content was the same that cemented the idea that most games would eventually be supplemented with add-ons. If the day-one versions of games were not going to be the "final versions" anyway, it makes sense that the fans have started to demand all kinds of modifications to the original products that are not limited to bug fixes or new levels.

In the context of the *Mass Effect 3* reviews, it is notable how the concept of DLC represents both corporate greed and a chance for the developers to "redeem themselves" after disappointing their loyal fans. Many reviewers were upset about the "day one DLC", additional content that was released simultaneously with the base game. This was mostly seen as an unfair way to cash in on fans, which Bioware again had to explain to them in another open letter (Schreier 2012).

In Bioware's case then, DLC turned out to be a double-edged sword, indeed. However, the lesson was later learned – again by *Witcher 3* developer CD Project Red: upon the release of the game, the company announced that it would release 16 free DLCs for the game and suggested that such practice should become "an industry standard rather than an exception to the general rule" (Makedonski 2015). The idea of video games as a medium where the products are almost expected to not be finished after the release of the first version has thus created a curious discursive tableau, where the fans play the industry by calling developers out for engaging in "greedy" strategies concerning the DLCs. Yet at the same time, DLCs have become an invaluable tool for developers to win the fans over. In the case of *Mass Effect 3*, releasing

the new ending as a free DLC was not enough to turn the tide on the negative attitudes towards both the game and the previous practices of the developer and Electronic Arts.

3. Research design and methods

This chapter further describes the mixed methods approach of this study and details how it is utilised in the coding and analysis of the Metacritic user reviews. I will begin by exploring the material and then move on to discuss the methodology and research design. Lastly, I will address the question of the position and “objectivity” of the researcher in the context of studying fans.

As Booth (2015, 4-17) notes, the current media landscape encourages media fans to develop and maintain not just one, but multiple online and offline identities. Both fans and the industry then take part in the spectacle of media discussion by playing out the roles defined by the discourse. Thus, it is by examining these roles and how they are played out that one has the ability to get to the bottom of how the relationship between the two is constructed.

I will argue that the way the video game fans perceive themselves in relation to the game developers (and vice versa) is tied to the concepts of participatory culture and reputation economy. The ways the fans has an enormous effect on how the industry works, what kind of content is produced and so on. This influence flows both ways — by subscribing to the idea of fandom in participatory culture as a primary way to identify their audience as consumers and communicating with them, the industry also affects the way fans are positioned in the discourse. Ultimately, both parties’ actions build the definition of what it means to be a gamer or a game developer.

From this standpoint, my goal is to examine the Metacritic user reviews from linguistic point of view: what do the fans say (explicitly and implicitly) about their expectations, the developers, the publishers, and, most importantly, how do they seek to position themselves in relation to them?

3.1 User reviews as research material

Metacritic user reviews serve as a great source of material for this study: by being put into position of having to evaluate the game and explain their opinion, the fans' writings offer a window to the reasons why they felt betrayed by Bioware and Electronic Arts. This lets us examine the recurring themes in the reviews as well as the possible change in the fans' attitudes after the release of the DLC. In order to examine both the fans' relationship with the developers and the discourse in which their exchange takes place, I analysed the reviews with my point of focus in how the fans refer to the discourse and position themselves in relation to the game and the industry.

Analysing how the fans "talk back" to Bioware and EA after the release of the DLC helps approaching the three research questions, because it makes it possible to examine how the fans acted as co-producers by telling the game's creators how the game should or should not have been done. On the other hand, it shows us how the fans reacted to the things the developers did and stated in their open letters. Lastly, the result of this exchange allows us to draw conclusions about what the developers possibly failed to understand about their audience.

The scores of the user reviews at Metacritic range from 0 to 10. Out of these scores, 8-10 is deemed "positive", 5-7 "mixed" and 0-4 "negative". At the time of writing, the total amount of user reviews for the Xbox 360 version of the game is 3715. For the purpose of this study, the amount of reviews analysed was a considerably smaller, namely 300. The reviews under my lens were collected from two distinct sets. Set number one consisted of the first 150 reviews published after the release of the game, starting from 6.3.2012. Set number two on the other hand, contained the first 150 reviews following the release of the Extended Cut DLC, starting from 26.6.2012. The reviews analysed were of the Xbox 360 version of the game.

3.2 Qualitative content analysis & quantitative content analysis

The field of fan studies has been notorious for its lack of methodological discourse. Evans & Stasi (2014, 8) trace the roots of this reluctance back to the academic disciplines that have influenced the development of fan studies: media and cultural studies, both of which have historically had an often rather fluid relationship with methodology. Traditionally, cultural studies have favoured a more “open and theoretically reflexive” approaches. However, whereas this paradigm has been questioned and become more versatile in other forms of cultural studies, fan studies’ avoidance of methodological discussion has largely prevailed.

Likely due to these influences, many fan scholars have taken a post-structuralist stance when it comes to questions of methodology. Historically, the standpoint has been far from unproblematic in the academic world. McKee (2003, 118), himself a believer in post-structuralist textual analysis, describes the problems that especially the hard sciences have with the methodology:

There are two aspects of (post-structuralist) textual analysis that are particularly unscientific. First, it doesn’t produce quantitative knowledge (numbers). The like interpretations that you produce aren’t given in terms of percentage likelihoods of how many people make will make such an interpretation nor of numbers of people who have made such an interpretation. And, second, this methodology isn’t “iterable” (repeatable).

McKee (Ibid., 118) goes on to state that it would make little sense for a post-structuralist to try and artificially make the analysis correspond to the scientific ideals of the hard sciences. Analysing texts relies heavily on interpretation, and thus there is no denying that two researchers interpreting the same text are very likely to end up with different conclusions. Scott (2013, ix-xiii), in her discussion

with Henry Jenkins, notes how fan studies, and Jenkins' work in particular, is heavily influenced by cultural studies, queer studies and feminist studies, that share this common idea of "writing from a standpoint". This idea is arguably very prominent in the field: it responds to the post-structuralist dilemma by embracing the individuality of the researcher. However, Stasi & Evans (2014, 18) argue that this tradition has created a situation where other approaches have become marginalised within fan studies and thus greater "methodological awareness" would make beneficial contributions to the field. There is simply no reason for the post-structuralist stance to have a de facto standard status within fan studies. For this reason, this study makes a conscious effort to make its methodological position as transparent as possible.

I will approach the user reviews by combining qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Qualitative analysis content recognises that a social scientist rarely studies a text that simply consists of "facts or alleged facts" and does not require "additional interpretation". The building blocks of qualitative content analysis are multidisciplinary: historically it has drawn influence from communication science, hermeneutics, qualitative social research, literature studies and psychology. (Kuckartz 2014.) The methods of qualitative analysis can vary greatly depending on the school of thought; this study does not adopt the aforementioned post-structuralist stance that abandons the idea of a systematic, repeatable method. That being said, it does not support the idea of "one objective truth" either. Neither is it against the concept of multiple, individual and culturally constructed readings of texts. Instead, it proposes that the process of analysis itself must be both systematic and repeatable so that the reasoning that has led to the conclusions of this particular interpretation are more transparent and can more easily be revisited and re-evaluated if needed. As Mayring (2014, 6-8) states, the "paradigm war" of qualitative and quantitative approaches is indeed hurtful to social sciences as a whole:

Good research in social sciences should reflect the relevance of the research question and the possible consequences; this is an important position especially within qualitative research. But in the context of justification, a postpositivistic or moderate constructivist position would be adequate to guarantee scientific rigor.

Most qualitative content analysis studies apply some kind of variation of the following process: *read and interpret the text, build categories, code segments of the text, analyse, present the results*. Additionally, each of these phases should be approached primarily with the research questions in mind. (Kuckartz 2014.) This study adopts this strategy as well. First, thematic categories were built from carefully analysing the reviews. Based on these categories, a coding chart was created to analyse the frequency of occurrence and change of these categories between the sets. Lastly, the themes and trends of the textual analysis were mirrored with the results of the coding in order to present the findings.

The coding phase of the process is where the quantitative content analysis methods were utilised. The coding procedure in quantitative content analysis often includes a mixture of manifest (visible) content and latent (meanings behind the manifest data) content (Rose, Spinks & Canhoto 2015, 1). This study measures the frequency of occurrence of both manifest (the number of times the developers, publishers and the ending were mentioned, review scores) and latent content (the feelings toward the game, developer/publisher and the ending).

Using multiple methods in qualitative analysis has sometimes been criticised of being non-compliant with the idea of reality being socially constructed. From this viewpoint, stacking multiple methods on top of each other will not help the researcher to get closer to any kind of universal “truth” of the topic – simply because such a thing does not exist. (Silverman 2005, 121.) However, such

claim makes the assumption that by using multiple methods, the researcher automatically does so *because* they believe that a greater number of methods results in the conclusions being more valid. This study adopts a mixed methods approach because both of the methods are better at providing answers to the specific research questions of this study. Qualitative textual analysis provides a great framework for understanding the “hows” of the relationship between the fans and the developers. Quantitative content analysis on the other hand, examines dispersion of the fan reactions and the change in it when comparing the two sets of reviews.

Traditionally, cultural studies in general have been somewhat indifferent with this sort of data: Deacon (2008, 1-8) performed an analysis of 130 articles in cultural studies journals and noted how they were mostly devoid of statistical data (only 8 percent presented primary data). This trend is troublesome because, as Deacon puts it “‘frequency of occurrence’ does count – even when it is not counted.” Thus, this study seeks to analyse the data critically from this standpoint as well.

3.3 Thematic categories: what was discussed in the reviews

During the first readings of the material, it was observed that the reviews frequently featured the following thematic categories.

Discussion of Bioware. The developing company Bioware seemed to be mentioned in many reviews. Interestingly, neutral comments were rare: most reviewers clearly had an opinion of the company and its success (or lack thereof) in various aspects of the game. From the point of view of the research questions, this was promising: it seemed that the material would offer enough substance in terms of analysing the fan-developer relationship. This aspect was

made even more exciting by the fact that many reviewers addressed the developing company directly – for the reviewers, the company itself seemed to have a strong personality with very human qualities (passion, ambition, greed etc.)

Discussion of Electronic Arts. The publishing company Electronic Arts was discussed by a number of reviewers. The role of EA in these accounts seemed to be that of an antagonist. The publishing company was often portrayed as an entity that had somehow tarnished the once-great Bioware.

Discussion of the ending. Unsurprisingly, the ending was discussed in the reviews often. The first set, the fans offered their opinions on the quality of the ending as well as whether they thought the negative hype was justified. The second set, again predictably, introduced the new ending DLC as a topic of discussion, and whether the fans thought it made the original ending better or not.

Discussion of the artistic qualities/value proposition of the game. As well as the ending and the developers, the reviewers discussed the overall artistic qualities of the game. These artistic qualities were often brought up in terms of what “Bioware had promised” or how the previous games in the series had set up certain expectations for the third game in the trilogy.

These categories built during the first readings, mirrored with the research questions, were used as a basis for the coding chart presented in the next chapter.

3.4 Counting and comparing: creating the coding chart

Based on the research questions and the themes built during the first readings of the material, a coding chart was created to observe the frequency of appearance and the change in selected aspects of the reviews.

A vital aspect of the coding was to create categories that would be useful while comparing the results from the two sets. The goal here would be to find out whether releasing the new ending was a successful strategy in terms of reaching out to the fans. Here, both the change in evaluation of the game and attitudes toward the developer/publisher were measured.

Each review in both sets was coded using the following chart:

A) Reviewer's nickname

B) The overall reaction. What was the reviewers opinion of the game in general?

1. Bad (0-5)
2. Mediocre (6-7)
3. Positive (8-10)

C) Mention of the developing company. Is Bioware mentioned in the review? If yes, in what kind of context?

1. Mentioned in a positive light
2. Mentioned in a negative light
3. Mentioned in a neutral light
4. Not mentioned

D) Mention of the publishing company. Is Electronic Arts mentioned in the review? If yes, in what kind of light?

1. Mentioned in a positive light
2. Mentioned in a negative light
3. Mentioned in a neutral light
4. Not mentioned

E) Mention of the ending. Is the game's ending/conclusion mentioned? If yes, in what kind of light?

1. Mentioned in a positive light
2. Mentioned in a negative light
3. Mentioned in a neutral light
4. Not mentioned

The results of the coding were visualised with charts for easier examination. With each question, the results from the two sets were compared side to side to observe the changes.

3.5 The researcher's position in studying fans

In the interview with Scott (2013, xii), Henry Jenkins muses how history has shown time and time again that in the field of fan studies, it is nearly impossible for a researcher to come up with truly significant insights without him being close to the subjects. Furthermore, Jenkins proclaims that it is far-fetched to try and understand popular culture in any form without being able to reflect on one's own emotional responses to it. In fan studies, the term "aca-fan" (short for academic fan) originally stems from Jenkins' work, and is used to describe the

researcher announcing his subjectivity and making it as transparent as possible (Ibid., xi).

It is to be noted that my position does indeed fall somewhere between the two parties analysed in this study. As someone who uses a significant amount of time playing games, as well as reading and writing about them, I feel the notion of aca-fan does indeed describe my viewpoint quite adequately. Additionally, my position in working life includes marketing, communications and project management in a digital design company. This may also have an effect on the themes I recognise in the material: I am looking at the reviews through the eyes of both a fan and a marketer.

It is important to note that declaring oneself an aca-fan does not automatically make the research more credible or self-conscious. As Evans and Stasi (2014, 15-16) note, “autoethnography” inspired by Jenkins’ work in fan studies instead has the danger of not being able to notice problematic issues in the research context. It does not help if the researcher simply recognises being invested in the culture he/she is studying – this should be reflected in critically evaluating the research methods as well. Aspiring for greater methodological awareness and transparency partly serves as an attempted solution for this issue also.

4. The Results

This chapter presents the results from coding the material as well as the textual analysis of the reviews.

4.1. The frequency of occurrence & change between the sets

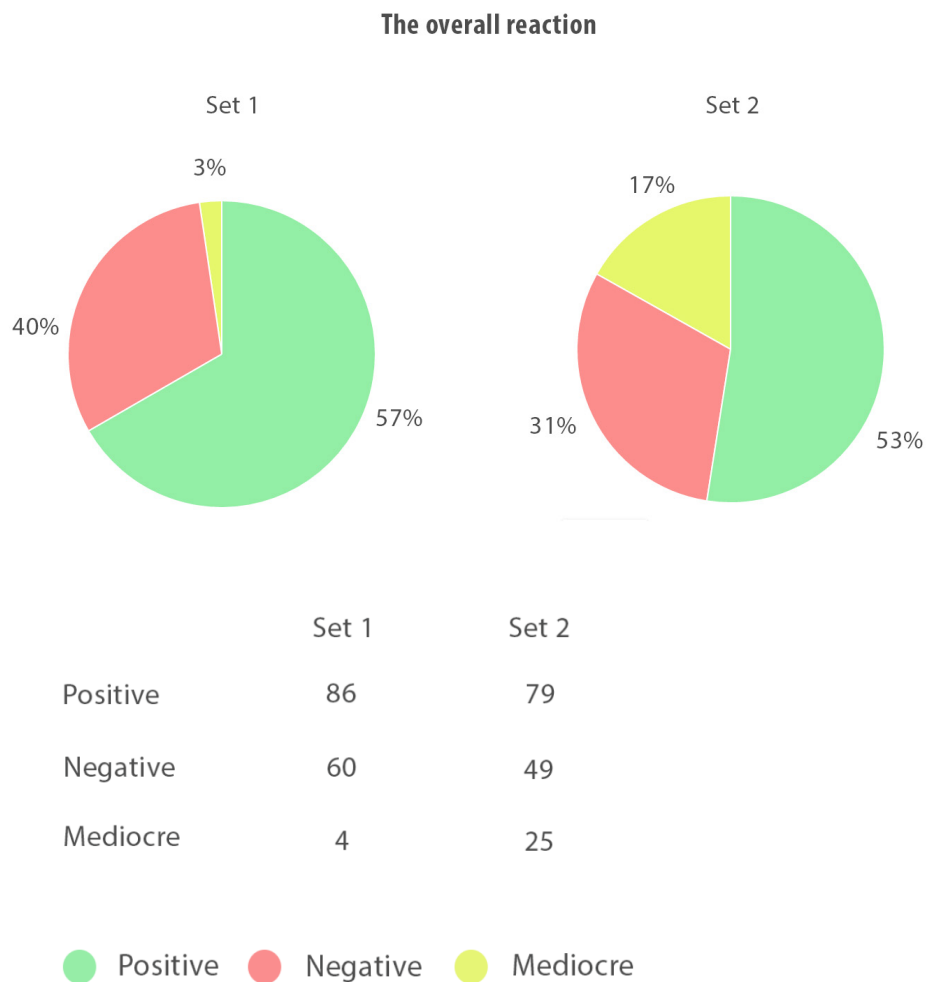


Figure 1. The overall reaction of reviewers in both sets.

The graphs in Figure 1 show that after the release of the DLC, the amount of negative reviews decreased. However, the amount of positive reviews decreased slightly as well. Thus, the collective opinion of the game remained mixed throughout the sets. This suggests two things: either the fans did not see the DLC as a successful effort to fix the ending, or there were other, equally significant factors influencing the review scores. The textual analysis in this chapter shows that both of these observations are reasonably well supported by the fans' reactions.

Mention of ending

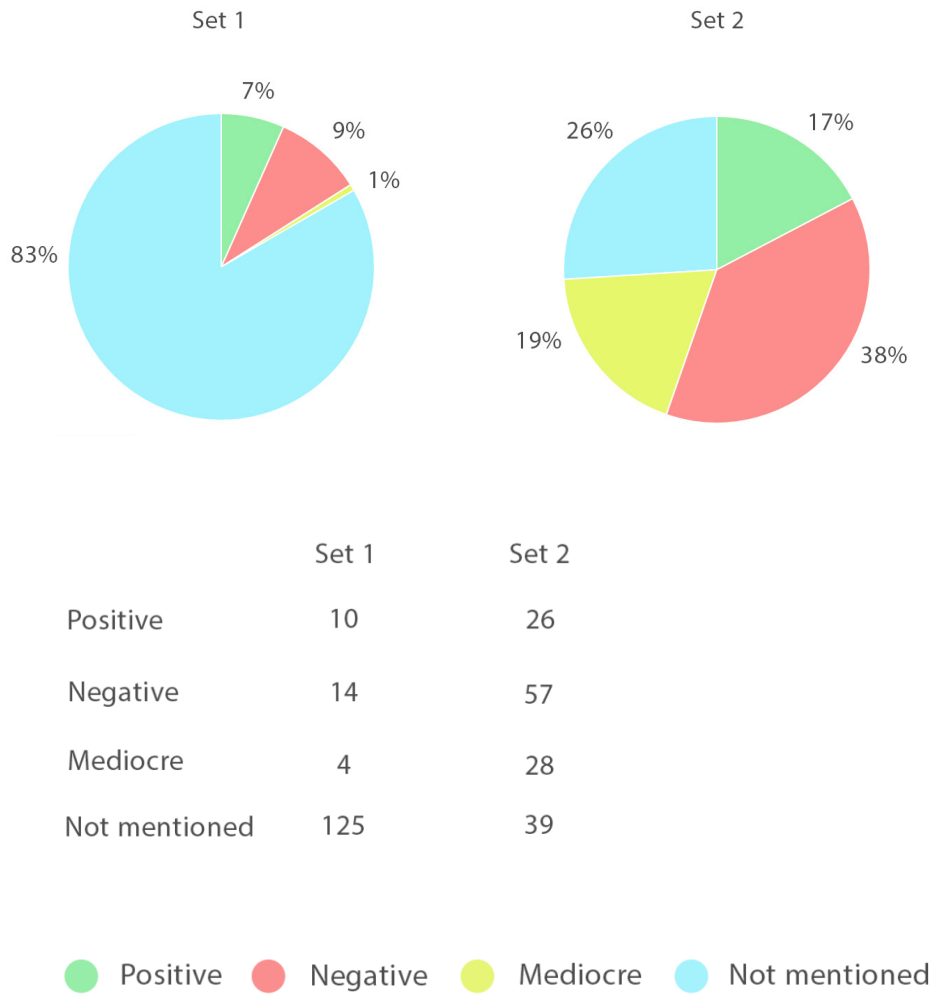


Figure 2. The reactions to the ending in both sets.

Figure 2 shows an example of how the social influence theory works in online environment. The graphs reveal that in the first set, the ending was not mentioned very often at all. In the second set however, it is discussed in 74% of the reviews. In the first set, the ending was not met with positive feedback either, but at that point it was also by no means the most discussed aspect of the game in the reviews. This is an interesting find: it seems that once the ending debacle had gained momentum, the reviewers seem to feel obliged to

have something to say about it. This may partly be explained by the probability that the first set contained a greater number of people who had not yet finished the game. The change however, is undeniably dramatic and illustrates how comprehensively the ending took over the discussion in between the sets.

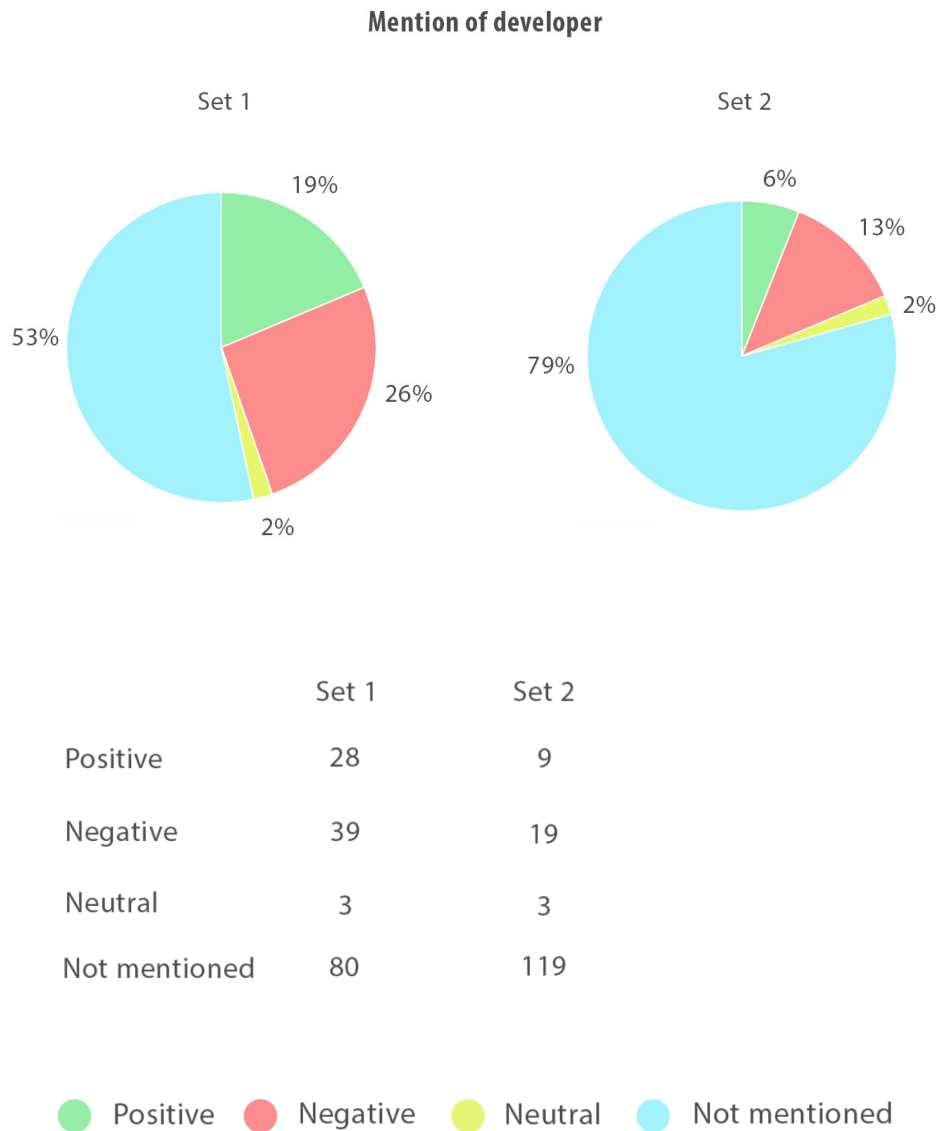


Figure 3. Number of mentions and attitudes towards the developing company Bioware.

In Figure 3, yet another shift of focus in the topics of discussion is witnessed. In the first set, Bioware is mentioned in almost half of all the reviews. The fans' feelings towards the creators are divided: 53% of all reviews mention the company with a negative tone of voice. The numbers change quite interestingly in the second set: here, only 21% of the reviews mention Bioware directly at all. However, of those mentions the majority (19 out of 31) are negative. Thus, it seems the DLC was not a tremendous success in terms of making the relationship between the developer and the fans better either. Instead, the rapidly increasing comments about the ending simply took over the discussion about Bioware in particular.

It is also worth noting that the same kind of polarity that drives the fans' reaction to the game in general drives the discussion about its creators as well. Out of all 70 mentions, only 3 could be labeled as neutral. This supports the textual analysis which makes it evident that the fan discourse in the reviews is dominated by extreme feelings at the both ends of the spectrum.

Mention of publisher

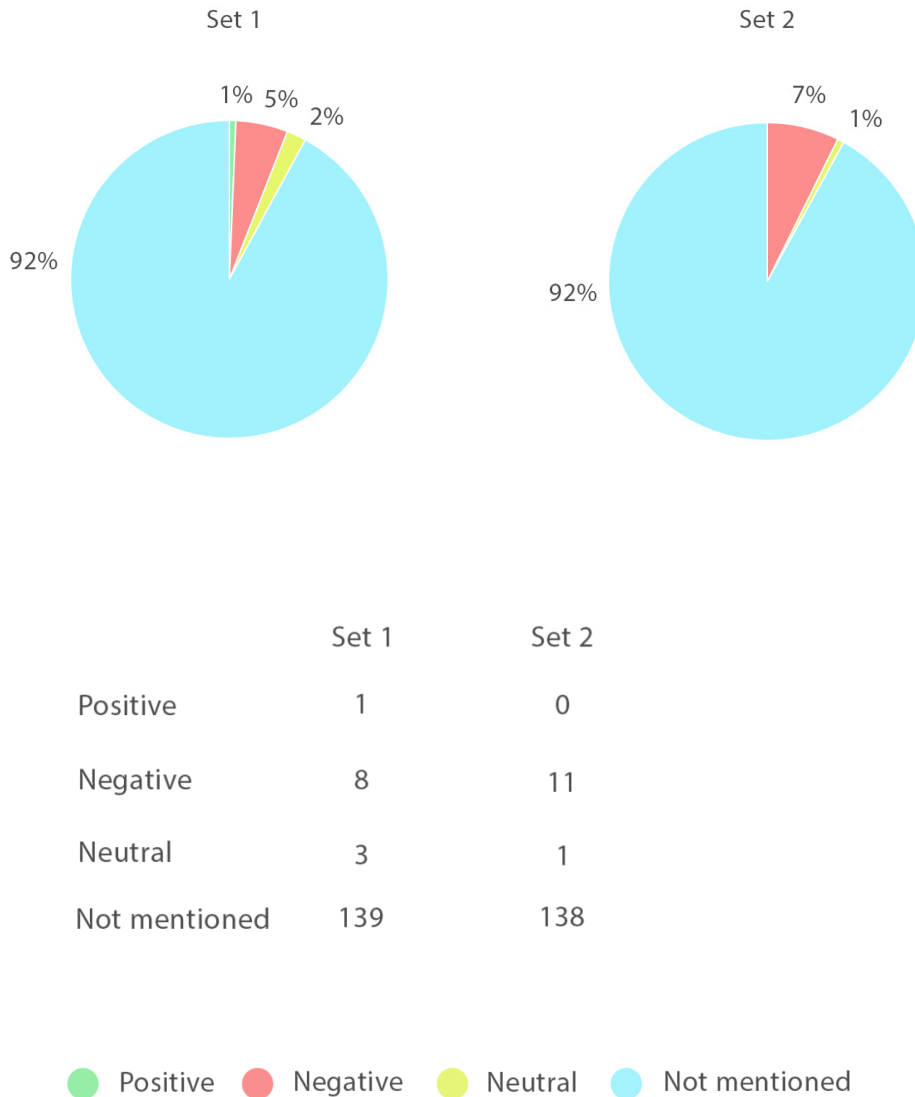


Figure 4. Number of mentions and attitudes towards the publisher Electronic Arts.

As one would guess, the publisher Electronic Arts is not mentioned in the reviews nearly as often as Bioware. What is fascinating however, is the unanimity of the malignant opinions about EA. Out of all 300 reviews in both sets, only one reviewer presents the publisher in a positive light. Even lukewarm opinions are rare – it seems that EA indeed does not indeed gain a great

amount of positive response from the fans. This is likely to be related to the publisher's reputation as a whole, as discussed in the previous chapters. The unanimous negativity towards the publisher is also related to the suspicion that the game's bad quality is explained by EA's greedy practices, as revealed by the textual analysis.

4.2. Textual analysis: themes of fan response

The textual analysis of the user reviews revealed a number of frequently occurring themes. In this chapter, I will explore and discuss each one of them in detail.

4.2.1. Betrayal

Perhaps the most evident trend in the data is the feeling of betrayal expressed by the fans. A great number of reviews address this in very much the same way: Bioware had a responsibility to build the game 'for the loyal fans' and is held accountable for letting them down. Many of these statements are highly emotional. As the graphs showed, the fan responses are rarely without pathos:

I am thoroughly disgusted at how much Bioware seems to disrespect their fans. NEVER should a game aim for a larger audience when it is already successful. You should aim on pleasing the fans you have, not aiming for more fans. -AstonishingAgon

Truly disappointing Bioware, sticking it to your oldest and most loyal fans. -mrgerbik

And, BioWare can kiss my ass too. Sellouts. Enjoy your yachts and whatever else you bought. I don't care. You aren't getting anymore of my money. -coelo

Mass Effect 1 was a great game and didn't deserve to end like this. Its like lovingly raising a son then having him backstab you when he gets older. Mass Effect 3 is a generic corridor shooter with pukingly bad dialog and a laughable story. The ending is like something my 5 year old niece wrote if I gave her 6 beers, yes it is THAT bad. Way to wrap up the story to your flagship IP Bioware. -JimmyRustler

Bioware has completely lost all credibility in the last few years. Not only because their new games are rushed and come nowhere near the level of excellence they used to, but because they treat their fanbase like **** and lie to them. -HunterZolomon

The competing, highly divided opinions of the fans closely resemble Johnson's (2007, 287) portrayal of the fans seeking the unified interpretative position in online discussion boards. This becomes evident when we observe how the reviews, especially in the first set, are in constant dialogue with each other:

"It's unfortunate to see such a great game and a great developer being attacked in such a petty manner. The Mass Effect series has been among the best gaming experiences I have had, and Bioware deserves a lot more respect." - BlackWhale

"This game is awesome but what i really wanted to say was that at least 95% of the negative reviews are fake spam reviews, also they came like

12 hours after the release which is impossible ALSO the spam accounts are also just downing bioware and i am not really sure why.” -Squirrilly

The theory is also a viable point of reference when comparing the results from the two sets in Figure 2 and mirroring them with the themes in what is being discussed in the reviews. The ending slowly becomes the main issue for the fan community, and soon there are hardly any reviews that do not mention it at all – and moreover, the general opinion of it is clearly negative. The discursive power rises from both the systematic “unification” of opinion, but also from the community’s power to choose *what* is being talked about. The sense of being betrayed is also present in the personification of both Bioware and EA – in many of the reviews, either one of them or both are addressed directly. The need to find a target to blame is clear:

“I don't blame Bioware so much as I blame EA.” -LostRiot

“Shame on you EA and Bioware for such a pathetic display.” -NateStC

That being said, what seems to divide the fans is the identity of the real monster. While Bioware does receive a great deal of frustration in the comments, Electronic Arts, when mentioned, is portrayed as a symbol of corporate greed. Bioware is declared guilty of letting itself be “bought”, but the fans that mention the publisher seem to believe that EA is the force that is truly to blame for the catastrophic drop in the game’s quality.

Bioware is pushing the cart, and EA is cracking the whip. -FriedMattato

ME was awesome, but it is dead and EA has been wringing money out of a corpse, much like a record label does to its dead artists. And, that is exactly what EA does, it buys talent and then whores it to death using only the name of something that was once great. EA may have a hundred thousand talented developers but it doesn't matter one bit. It is well known that EA rushes their games to the market in order to get cash. Their MO is buy a popular game and whore it out. That's what you have here ME3 is an ugly whore of pimp daddy EA, just wants your cash, doesn't give a crap if you come back for more ME4 or 5 because they'll have new whores soon. -coelo

A lot of you complain about the abuse that is wrought upon us, but you still buy it. EA and Activision got you, just like the drug pusher on the street corner, and that's what it's become. (...)We have to grow up and realize our childhood hobby has been twisted by corporations.

-theCRazyBAGman

Interestingly enough, the fans' mistrust in Bioware that arguably began when the company was bought by Electronic Arts is reflected in the reviews. Many reviews refer to the history of the company as the "glory days" and express their disappointment in the direction that Bioware has taken since the EA buyout:

"(...)this game is a very poor attempt by a once great company made to appeal to the mass market and not it's original once loyal fans,for me this franchise is finished" -cyclekarl

"So yes, I'd be wrong to score it any less than 7/10, but what I will say is that after the debacle that was Dragon Age 2 and now the less than stellar Mass Effect trilogy conclusion, I will be careful to spend money on a product

bearing the Bioware logo, simply because the once accepted measure of excellence they held in a gamers heart has been lost.” -Tubey

The nostalgia for the excellence of the past is a typical trope in fan discourse. Johnson (2007, 287 citing Jenkins & Tulloch 1995) notes how television fans form their collective opinion by dividing the history of the shows into a series of “golden ages” and “all-time-lows”. Fans use nostalgia as an argumentation tool: the “true fans” who have been there from the start approach new audiences who enjoy the direction not sanctioned by the fan community as childish and unintellectual (Ibid., 288-290). The same strategy is at play in the Mass Effect reviews:

“There is nothing epic about this game, it is a husk of a game from a once-great company that will soon wipe themselves from the face of the galaxy by their horrible decisions to alienate all their fans with an iq above 80.” -
Veramis

In addition to the issues above, the reviewers also expressed the opinion that they felt the artistic decisions were not consistent in relation to the franchise’s history:

“The ending is very unoriginal, contradicts the franchise and contains a lot of space magic.” -BlackPhoton

“The entire game has been casualized into explosions. EXPLOSIONS EVERYWHERE” -disasta121

As Johnson (2007, 288) notes, fans can be very specific about the object of their fandom not mixing conventions from “undesirable” sources to the mix. In the case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the fans were dismayed at the show for their decision to embed “soap opera conventions” to the storyline. The Mass Effect fans on the other hand, were concerned that the franchise third instalment was not aesthetically in line with the previous ones, since the developers had forced in “magical elements” and big budget action film conventions.

4.2.2 The ownership of the story

Another interesting trend in the reviews is the debate over the “ownership” of the game’s story. In the reviews, many fans express their disappointment not simply with the ending, but the lack of choice in the game in general:

The ending leaves people with almost no closure, instead paving the way for DLC and the inevitable next game in the universe to cash in on the name. The choices you make have no impact on the end result, nothing done over the course of THREE ENTIRE GAMES makes any difference to your ultimate ending, absolutely inexcusable and lazy.” - Gurt

Your choices throughout the game do little to affect the outcome. - Botswana

Doing anything in the three games really has no bearing whatsoever on the last choice. That is why I think the endings do a great disservice to a series lauded for choices. Nothing really matters other than the very last

one, which are all the same as long as your score is high enough. -
crystal3001

Bielby, Harrington & Bielby (2009) note that fans claiming “ownership” to the text is especially typical in the world of soap operas. The way fans interact and make statements about plot developments is organised and features a strong element of authority in the sense that the fans seem to possess almost an unflinching sense of being justified to make judgements about the shows – and present their views on how to make them better. The reasoning behind this is that the fans see themselves as an entity whose responsibility is to make sure that the aesthetic value does not suffer in the face of economic decisions made by the producers.

The reasoning behind the opinions of the Mass Effect fans follows similar logic. The episodic nature of the game series is not unlike television dramas in the sense that, just like television fans, the fans of Mass Effect feel a strong need to defend their inner aesthetic consistency. The customers, in these cases at least, unwaveringly believe they know best, which is illustrated by comments like these:

To start its attempts at emotional manipulation are slightly hamfisted, not ineffective but very clumsily implemented and unrelated to my characters background - which at this point I'm pretty sure BioWare have completely forgot that they even wrote. -TheAlyGator

Both my wife and I played all three games and we both had the same reaction to the end. What interns made this ending? The concept philosophy of the end was right on the mark for a Sci-Fi. But it was

poorly poorly executed and the choices you made through out the series were rendered completely irrelevant. -Fatbastad

Here, fans identify themselves as “outside producers” criticising Bioware for either not being familiar enough with their own story or simply being incompetent and thus unable to finish their own story in a satisfying way.

4.2.3 The “wrong kind” of video game fans

The auteurs & businessmen aspect discussed in chapter 2 partly explains why the fans felt betrayed with Mass Effect 3: many felt that the mechanical and aesthetic approach had been changed to to serve the “on-the-rails” audience rather than the fans who had enjoyed the previous instalments of the series.

The problem with it for me isn't really the ending (yes, it's true, it was unbelievably bad), but rather the fact it should be renamed "Gears of Modern Battlefield 5". I honestly don't class ME3 as an RPG; rather, it's an on the rails mediocre shooter, interspersed with a lot of cut scenes and dialogue, which is again on the rails. -Tubey

Here, the reviewer mocks the game by wittingly simultaneously comparing it to games associated with the “on-the-rails” shooter genre (Gears of War, Call of Duty:Modern Warfare and Battlefield). The theme is repeated in other reviews:

“All the work I put into ME1 and ME2 feel like a waste. Looks like bioware decided to make any choices from the previous 2 games

pointless so they could bring in the shooter crowd as evidenced by the new character added in the last of a trilogy so that anyone can pick this up a play. Why did I even bother with the first two then?” -sanqueue

What is interesting here from the ownership angle is the fact that this particular reviewer does not seem any point in having played the first games in the first place, because the third game is more accessible for “anyone”. The idea that the game is now made for people outside the “core fan group” seems unacceptable enough for this particular fan to not touch the finished product at all, and further exemplifies how the idea of exclusivity can play a big role even in seemingly mainstream franchises such as the Mass Effect games.

For the fans, flirting with the “on-the-rails” approach is a big sin especially in Mass Effect’s case where freedom choice has always been one of the series’ biggest selling points. This theme comes up repeatedly in the reviews:

Bioware made 2 fantastic games in Mass Effect and Mass Effect 2 where you controlled Commander Shepard. Your Shepard. In Mass Effect 3 Bioware has taken the commander back. -VictorS

5. Conclusions

The debacle between Bioware and Mass Effect fans has mainly been approached as a fan community's battle to change the controversial ending. However, as we have seen, the reception of the game is not solely based on this aspect of the game, and the exchange between the parties is indeed a part of a bigger discourse of video game fandom and participatory culture. This chapter presents the central findings of this study and builds a model of the aspects that are crucial to take into account when discussing the relationship of video fans and the industry.

5.1 The workings of the fan-industry relationship

This study has discussed the fan reviews and mirrored them with the concepts of participation culture, reputation economy and social influence. The relationship of fans and the industry relies heavily on two aspects: the inner hierarchies of the fanbase and the ways the industry sees, defines and has preconceptions about their audience.

In the analysis chapter, we have seen how social influence at the very least defines the topics of discussion within the fan community. But an equally important aspect is that these opinions are formed by a very small minority of the audience formed by millions. The effect that the online discussion had however, was tremendous. Thus, the fans that define the feedback discourse are the ones who rank higher in terms of "capital" in the reputation economy. This is what the Mass Effect 3 debacle highlights; the fans that voice their opinions online have immense power to influence the "unified interpretation".

The responses of the industry are based on the interpretation of how the fans "are like". This is reflected in how the fans are addressed as a solid, unified

community in the open letters as well as the industry practices that emphasise the “core fans”. As the social influence is driven mostly by a vocal minority, it makes sense for the developers to plan their communications and marketing on their terms. However, it seems that the industry-created representation of the core fan’s needs is not necessarily solid. The reviews revealed disappointment in how this interpretation of what the fans really wanted was not accurate, and that Bioware had failed to address or understand many broader aesthetic and artistic issues that the fans had with the game.

The reviews showed that the relationship between the parties is also heavily influenced by the image of the developer and how well they are able to maintain what the fans feel are their brand promise. In Bioware’s case, the problem was the alliance with the not-so-highly-regarded publisher Electronic Arts, as well as the incorporation of “on-the-rails” elements that were considered distasteful and serving the “mainstream” shooter fans.

5.2 The four aspects of fan expectations

Our textual analysis reveals that at the heart of the fan-developer relationship there are three important concepts tied to the fans’ expectations: *preconceptions*, *fan identities* and *prejudices*. Together they create a model through which it is easier to mirror the decisions made in both development and marketing phases of video games. The model is purposefully general in nature, and not by all means all-encompassing. It’s purpose is to function as a checklist for discussion, and should serve game developing companies of all sizes, academics interested in the study of game audiences and game journalists seeking to present alternative angles in articles discussing the fan reception of games and the relationship between the fans who play games and the people who make them.

Mechanic expectations. Preconceptions are the set of expectations the fans have for the mechanics of the game. These include aspects like mechanical complexity and the amount of freedom the players will have in the game world. Mass Effect 3 was expected to offer great freedom in terms of customisation and choices related to the story, and the fans did not feel these expectations were fulfilled. What is crucial to notice is that in the reviews, the fans were often most disappointed in the fact that the game did not meet their ideas of how the game's inner logic should work. One of the most criticised aspect of the ending, for example, was that every choice the player would make in the end would result in a very similar outcome, allowing for very little customisation in the experience.

For the most part, by simply extending the pre-existing endings Bioware did not address the fundamental problem many of the reviewers had with the endings (not to mention their other concerns). This part of the reason why the user ratings stayed mostly the same even after the DLC was released.

Aesthetic expectations. The Mass Effect fans were displeased with the fact that the franchise had begun flirting with blockbuster movie conventions. Straying too far from the "aesthetic comfort zone" seems to result in conflict with the fans' expectations.

From the fan studies' point of view, this is related to the idea of genres as presets for audience expectations. Peter T. Rabinowitz (1985, 419) argues that rather than seeing genres as a set of features and conventions found within the texts, they can be approached as "strategies that readers use to process text". Jenkins (1992, 133) argues when the fans read a certain media text and expect it to represent and follow the "unwritten rules" of the certain genre, disappointment occurs.

The fans' response shows that video games have two distinct genre layers, mechanical and aesthetic. Each comes with their own set of expectations. Even if the Mass Effect 3 ending could be seen as aesthetically consistent (the series had arguably built up to its Greek tragedy finale from the very start), the fans did not see this artistic decision as mechanically correct (the endings should have had more variation).

Interestingly enough, game studies have debated over this layered nature of digital games for quite some time. In the early 00s, the two opposing schools of thought were coined *ludologists* and *narratologists*. A very brief and somewhat simplified summary of the now undeniably dated debate is that ludologists criticised narratologists for approaching games as a story-driven medium and instead proposed that they should primarily be seen as rule systems. (Gosling & Crawford 2011, 137-138.) When we approach games and the expectations of the gamers via genres, it becomes evident that instead of one approach being more relevant than the other, modern video games as a medium are most often a marriage of these two layers. As the reviews show, this is crucial when we seek to understand the hopes and expectations of the fans.

Fan identities. In terms of taste and preferences, video game fans can be divided into various self-aware groups. The individuals of these groups are not necessarily bound by genres. Rather, the common denominator of their taste in games is more likely to be related to broader views of what kind of experiences video games should be, as well as ideas about the attributes that the audiences playing certain kinds of games might possess. In the reviews this differentiation was expressed by constructing the image of fans of “on-the-rails” mainstream games as “the other”. These “wrong kind of fans” that the franchise was now supposedly trying to please were often presented as simple-minded and unintellectual. Marketing the game for the kind of audience that the existing fan base does not identify with is likely to cause some protest within the existing community. Bioware's dismissal of these fan identity politics is highlighted by a

statement from the company's senior producer Fernando Melo who, much to the fans' horror, expressed in an interview that Bioware "wanted Call of Duty's audience" (NowGamer 2011).

Prejudices against the developer/publisher. A significant amount of the reviews is coloured with prejudices towards Bioware and Electronic Arts. Video game fans are extremely aware of the public image of the game studios, and it plays an important part in the reception of the games. This shows in many of the reviews:

"I've heard of Bioware's reputation of late. I find it to be very true in this case." -abcded1

"Unfortunately like this game, Bioware is a shadow of its former self." - vidkid01

As with fan feedback in general, emotional response to a brand often plays a significant role in how the products are received. The lesson to be learned here is that video games do not exist in a vacuum: the game fans are often also fans (or anti-fans) of the game studios, and this is visibly reflected in their behaviour.

5.3 A model of the communication between fans and the industry

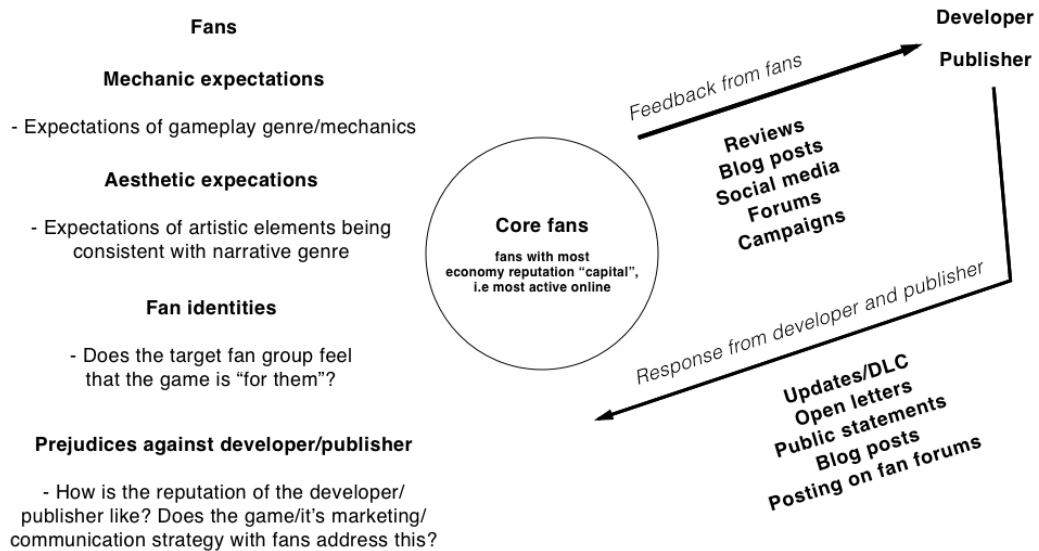


Figure 5. Model of the various aspects at play in the discourse of fan-industry communication.

Figure 5 is a model of the central findings of this study. Fan feedback is influenced by the four expectational aspects, based on which the fans will give their feedback to the developer or publisher in various forms (reviews, blog and forum posts, campaigns etc.). The feedback is produced by the “core fans”, ie. the fans who are most active in the online sphere. The publisher and developer respond to the core fans’ feedback in the form of public statements, updates, open letters, blog and forum posts etc. In order for this response to be successful, the four expectational aspects should be evaluated and taken into account.

No great change in ratings between the two review sets signalled that by responding to the feedback with the new ending DLC in the form it was realised,

Bioware had fundamentally misread the fan discourse. By evaluating the situation using the aspects presented by the model, the results would arguably have been better for both parties.

That being said, as the model is based on a relatively limited amount of research material, it naturally functions more as a gambit than an all-encompassing presentation of the complex and multi-layered discourse. Moreover, as we have seen, the relationship between fans and the industry is under constant negotiation. What seems most important in the discourse now might become less so in the future. As it stands, the model should still be tested, updated and mirrored with further case studies in order to fully evaluate its relevance.

6. Discussion

This chapter evaluates and discusses the relevance of this study and presents ideas for how it could be continued and improved upon in future studies. I will also briefly discuss how this case study has exemplified the ways in which fan activism has changed – and indeed stayed the same.

6.1 Evaluating the study

This study has aimed to describe the way the relationship between video game fans, developers and publishers is constructed and how it reflects the wider issues of the video game culture. It's secondary goal was to discuss how the pitfalls of the fan-industry communication could be avoided.

The mixed methods approach produced useful and insightful data rather effortlessly, which soon revealed that the methodological approach was fruitful for these particular research questions. The fans addressed their feelings about Bioware and Electronic Arts surprisingly directly in the reviews. This made the information produced by this study relevant not only in terms of the academic experiment – the model no doubt serves as a valid discussion opener when discussing the strategies of the developing companies within the industry as well.

300 reviews from one review site does not of course represent the whole spectrum of fan feedback. Thus, it would be interesting to compare the results to material gathered from another source – would the fans' writings have revealed different points of view at the official Bioware forum, for example?

This study has discussed the concept of “core gamer” in relation to the reputation economy. However, the dynamic where the most vocal minority of

fans has this much power begs for a question: what about the actual majority of gaming fans? Would they agree on the unified interpretation of the core fan community? What would be the best way to study this? Moreover, how could the gaming industry develop its communication strategies to the direction where the exchange is not limited to the one had with the core fans? As Shaw's (2011) study on the gaming fans' identity politics revealed, there are probably whole audience segments of players that currently fall completely off the industry's marketing radar.

6.2 The rise of the commentator

The dynamics of the reputation economy and participation culture have had interesting consequences, not only in terms of how commenting and participating has become the currency of fanlike behaviour, but also in the way some commentators themselves have become superstars.

Gaming commentary is anything but a niche: various let's play channels are among the most popular on YouTube. The most famous commentators, such as Swedish-born Felix Kjellberg, a.k.a PewDiePie, are top-tier celebrities and millionaires. (Dredge 2014 & Dredge 2015.) This illustrates just how important commentary has become to the video game culture: the biggest stars are not necessarily the people who create the games, but the people who play them and share their experiences and insights in entertaining ways. If anything, the rise of the commentator speaks volumes of the power fans have within video game culture; many fan commentators have more followers in the social media than the actual game companies.

For many, YouTubers are easy to identify with because they are just like gamers themselves. PewDiePie, interestingly enough, greets his fans at the end of each video with a "brofist" aimed directly at the screen. YouTubers are perhaps the

single most strong indication of the shifting power dynamics between fans and the industry. The idea of fans as the “free labor” of the reputation economy is challenged when the fan commentators can be millionaires. The Mass Effect case reflects this change and represents a pivotal turning point where the fan commentators’ influence affects the content posthumously.

6.3 Where should we go from here?

This study has highlighted many aspects of how the discourse between game developers and video game fans is constructed and maintained. However, many new questions arose during the process that this material and approach alone could nearly hint at. Perhaps the most important one is the segmentation of power within the fan community. We have discovered that the segment of video game fans that continuously voices their opinions online possesses great discursive power and influence within the video game culture. The question that this evokes is of course what kind of characteristics do the people who belong to this core fan category share? Which age groups do they belong to? Are they predominantly male, as the stereotype suggests? And what about the other fan groups that might not get as well represented in the discourse? How much would they agree or disagree with the way that the AAA games are made? How is this collective opinion formed over time? Could it be explored in a study that would delve into the The study of video game fans is in desperate need of studies concerning the demographics of the audience members with the most power. Finding insightful answers to these kinds of questions would no doubt require the marriage of ethnographic and quantitative methods.

The model of various discursive aspects at play in the industry-fan dialogue that I have presented in this study is by no means complete. Since 300 user reviews and a single case study can only reveal so much, the logical next step would be to expand the model by trying to utilise it in different contexts and seeing how

well it works as a canvas for explaining the dynamics between the parties. As such, the model may yet be overtly simplified.

Two things remain certain: the relationship between the fans and the people behind digital games is in turmoil – and the issues of discursive power need to be better understood and brought to mainstream attention in order to better make sense of the situation. I have talked earlier about how the digital reputation economy may lead to two significant downsides in terms of video game culture: the fans get used as free labor and the industry is tempted to utilise the said labor to create products that do not take risks but instead release carbon copies of previous successes. By understanding the discourse and the power struggle within, we may acquire the knowledge necessary to shift the digital reputation economy further away from this state of status quo. The digital reputation economy no doubt offers possibilities for discussion that would truly make better use of the technologies that enable content creators and their fans to take part in exchange which fuels innovation instead of cultural conservatism.

6.4 Fan activism: how much has changed?

In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins (1992, 121-122) explored how fans at the time protested and critiqued the works they did or had previously adored. In one chapter, Jenkins explores how the fans of the fantasy drama series *The Beauty and the Beast* voiced their disappointment in the series' third series. The series, the fans felt, had become "unrecognisable" and the changes made to the plot did not feel logical in the context of the show and its characters. A common opinion amongst the fans was that the lack of romantic closure in the series was an "insult" to the fans expecting it (Ibid., 145).

In another chapter of the book, *Star Trek* fans are put under the lens. The notion of fans having a "moral right" to criticise the show they love, Jenkins (Ibid., 88)

argues, stems from the idea that the fans are not merely expressing their own views, but are simultaneously speaking for the whole fan community.

These insights offer interesting points of comparison to our case study. Mainly because in terms of fans voicing their disappointment and the reasons behind it have not really changed. Moreover, it seems that video game fans do indeed share more characteristics with fans of other popular media than they do not: claiming ownership of the object of fandom and holding the content creators responsible for “betraying the fans” is not at all unique to the fans of video games.

What has changed however, is the role of fandom as a far more common mode of consumerism and the channels available for the fans to voice their concerns. Far behind are the times when physical letters to fanzines were the *modus operandi* of fan activism. The hopes and concerns of the fans may have stayed the same, but discourse-wise, they have much greater weight. Both the video game fans and the video game industry have embraced this development wholly in a medium that is arguably by nature based around the idea of participation than other forms of popular entertainment. In the case of Mass Effect 3, fans went to great lengths to write and direct their own alternative endings. As an example, a fan named Gerry Pugliese wrote a 400 pages manuscript for a not one but a number of new endings (Lowe 2014).

Of course, fan-made content such as this is not a new phenomenon. Fan fiction is an enormously popular and ever-expanding genre of writing in the web. Myriad of online communities are devoted to just publishing these stories written by fans to other fans (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 6). Most of this content is written by hobbyists and is completely free. An important part of this culture is the continuous exchange between the fans as they revise and build upon each others' ideas and content. Hellekson (2009) notes how this exchange within

online fan communities is built around the economy of giving “small symbolic gifts” (comments, artworks etc.) to each other.

This makes sense in the context of fans positioning themselves as separate from commercial entities and often seeing themselves as “protectors” of their object of fandom from such monetary influences. The concept of fans claiming ownership of content is thus almost never characterised by them simply not liking the direction the makers have chosen to take. Instead, the type of antagonistic behaviour on display in Mass Effect’s case often features an ideological aspect as well. The reviews show how the fans were disappointed not only with the ending per se, but also linked it with how they felt the developers, perhaps pressured by the publisher, were “selling out” by rushing the work to meet deadlines and altering the series’ aesthetic logic in order to please a wider audience.

This development places a great deal of emphasis on the means of communication between the parties. The emergence and rising importance of professions such as community managers speaks of the fact that the industry has taken the shift seriously. However, as our study has shown, the arena of developer-fan communication is very much riddled with confusion and lack of best practices. As fans and fandom begins to have more and more power to directly affect content, the future directions of video games as a medium may very well depend on how well all parties begin to understand and are able to affect the discourse around it.

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