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Different Scores: Video Gamers' Use of Amateur and Professional Reviews

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Different Scores: Video Gamers' Use of Amateur and Professional Reviews

by

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AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL REVIEWS

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Abstract

Though past research has measured the relationship between critical reviews and public response to such things as film and online products, there has been little investigation on the subject of video games. This study collected 146 survey responses aimed at gathering information on usage of amateur reviews, usage of professional critic reviews, and time spent playing games. The survey asked questions about respondents' beliefs regarding professional critics and amateur reviewers, and the review industry in general. Study respondents' views of the review industry, and their personal opinions of professional critics, show correlations with willingness to incorporate reviews in purchasing decisions. More respondents reported user reviews more useful than they did professional critic reviews.

Keywords: video games, user reviews, professional critics, evaluative gap

Different Scores: Video Gamers' Use of Amateur and Professional Reviews

In 2012, BioWare released the final chapter in their video game trilogy, entitled *Mass Effect 3*. Their two previous titles in the series had been well received by critics and users alike, but the release of *Mass Effect 3* had a particularly divisive effect on the gaming community: professional game reviewers rated *Mass Effect 3* very highly, citing its engrossing gameplay and story line, but the gaming public took few pains to hide their disappointment in the final product (Thier, 2012). As Table 1 shows, there was a pronounced gap in how the game was reviewed by professional critics, compared to how it was reviewed by gamers. Overall, the game earned Electronic Arts–BioWare's parent company and publisher– $200 million by May of 2012 (Sterling, 2012). At first glance, it appears that negative user reviews cannot substantially affect the sales of a game that has such a high rating from professional reviewers.

A 2010 study conducted by Electronic Entertainment and Design Research (EEDAR) showed that video game reviews by professional critics do have an impact on player perception of quality ("The Influence," 2010). Players read reviews of the game *Plants vs. Zombies* before playing it, and researchers found that those players who had read positive reviews of the game were more likely to rate it positively than those who had read no review at all. Likewise, those who had read a negative review were more likely to review it negatively. The researchers explained this behavior as an instance of anchoring, whereby previous references or impressions can influence a person's thoughts on a subject when it is encountered again.

Two-step flow theory suggests that the game reviewers are acting as opinion leaders. They play games and then form an impression of them, and presumably their personal impressions are imparted into their reviews. Reviewers could also be acting as gatekeepers. By

controlling which information reaches the consumer, they can possibly steer a person's reaction towards a game in a specific definition. These theories are not mutually exclusive to each other, and both could be happening at the same time.

The EEDAR study did not examine the role of user reviews for video games. Websites such as Metacritic.com allow the gaming public to post their own reviews of video games. These scores are aggregated and shown next to an aggregation of professional critic reviews. What becomes immediately apparent is that, for some games, there is a vast difference between professional reviews and user reviews, as displayed by Metacritic's aggregation software. These gaps are the result of a game being highly rated by professional critics, but receiving a low rating from users. Preliminary research shows that it is seldom the other way around. Table 1 shows some games with more pronounced gaps between critics and users.

Table 1

Score Comparisons: Critics & Users

Game	Critic Score	User Score	Gap
Diablo 3	88	37 (3.7)	51
Mass Effect 3	93	52 (5.2)	41
Dragon Age 2	79	43 (4.3)	36
Call of Duty: MW2	94	60 (6.0)	34
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	90	51 (5.1)	49
Spore	87	46 (4.6)	41

All scores taken from www.metacritic.com. User scores are shown on Metacritic as single digit numbers, i.e., 5.0 or 5.5, etc. A conversation with Metacritic's customer service confirmed that the scores are equalized by simply moving the decimal. So 5.5 becomes 55 with no loss of accuracy. The number in parenthesis is the original score.

It could be that user reviews do have an effect on sales. A study (Hu, Liu, & Zhang, 2008) showed that positive user reviews can affect the sales of books and DVDs on Amazon.com, though this effect was subject to diminishing returns. Another study (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008) showed that for theatrical films, online user reviews contributed to box office growth, but unlike reviews for DVDs, the content and eventual rating of user reviews did not matter to the film's overall success at the box office. Instead, the volume of user reviews was the driving factor in how influential the reviews were on the film's financial success. This seems to satisfy the axiom that there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Several themes begin to emerge from this data. First, reviews of any kind–whether from professional critics, or from individual users–can have an effect on a person's decision to purchase a product, whether it is a DVD or a movie ticket. However, as noted in Table 1 there are clearly instances where a product (in this case, video games) is highly reviewed by critics, negatively reviewed by users, but is still considered a financial success. In some cases, there is a disconnect between what users expect out of a game, and what game critics will find satisfactory. This can be explained in multiple ways, from each group subscribing to a different aesthetic, to a genuine disagreement as to what makes a game good or bad.

Since both professional critic reviews and user reviews can drive sales, it is safe to conclude that both the professional critic and the average user are viewed as reliable sources of information and criticism by at least some portion of the population. However, it is not clear which of these groups has more "clout" with those gamers who read reviews, since both Duan et al. and Hu et al. are silent on video game user reviews. Further, there has been little research done on the level of trust gamers have for the various review outlets that exist, whether they be

paid-subscription magazines or anonymous user reviews found on websites, and anything in between.

Rationale

Scholarly

Several recent studies are aimed at discerning the efficacy of user reviews on how well a product or a film will sell. Film criticism itself has long been a subject of interest to communication scholars, because it can tell researchers a lot about what critics value, and how those values interact with the moviegoer. For example, by analyzing a summer blockbuster, and then analyzing the size of the film's audience, researchers may be able to determine what values the film audience finds appealing by judging attendance. Or, the researcher may simply discover that people like to watch explosions in early August–much to the critic's annoyance.

Like films, games are often reviewed differently by consumers than by professional critics. Studies in film criticism suggest several explanations for this, ranging from differences in taste (Gans' *taste public* theory) or differences in expectation. In the latter case, film critics may go to see a film for a different reason than a consumer, and culturally we seem to be aware of this distinction. Presumably, this is why people will still go see a movie that has been panned by critics.

There has been no real study on this effect in video gaming. Therefore, examining the disparity between users and professional critics could yield useful information concerning the qualities of a game that consumers and professional reviewers deem important or influential. In addition, research could provide valuable data on who reads game reviews, why they are read,

how much trust consumers place in game reviews, and how these factors effect gamer behavior–

if they do so at all.

Currently, there are no tools in place to measure these attributes. The closest

approximation exists in those tools used to study consumer interactions with film, but these tools

are not necessarily compatible with gaming. It is worth the scholarly inquiry to develop these

new tools.

Social

Determining if a disparity in review scores has an effect on sales has an obvious market

implication for video gaming. Therefore, marketers and game publishers should be interested in

the results of the study. If nothing else, the data would be useful in figuring out how gamers use

gaming reviews to make purchasing decisions, and what level of trust gamers have for the

professional review critic and the individual user.

From a user standpoint, knowing that personal user reviews can affect game sales,

consumers may be more likely to write reviews, since they know their input is valuable on some

level. Users may feel they are doing a public service by warning others of a sub-standard

product. Also, user reviews may be an effective way to combat any potential gatekeeping of

information by the professional critic or the game publisher.

Literature Review

Two-step flow theory describes a phenomenon whereby opinion leaders can affect the

flow of information to the general public as it is received from the mass media complex (Katz &

Lazarsfeld, 1955). While this theory was originally postulated to describe the dissemination of

political messages during a presidential campaign, it eventually became used as a way to

measure the effect of professional film critics on movie-going audiences. Specifically, researchers began viewing film critics as potential drivers of public opinion, and not just commentators or art critics.

There have been several attempts to explain this relationship. Austin (1983) noted that the public seemed very much aware of the difference between themselves and movie critics. In this work, Austin examines two theories regarding the differences between critic and public reception of films. The first, Gans' taste public theory (1975), suggests that critics and consumers share a similar aesthetic, that the critic reviews the film based on what the critics–and by extension, the critic's audience–thinks of it. Conversely, the *elitist/snob* position predicts that film critics view movies differently than do public film-goers. Under this view, a critic will evaluate a film based on its artistic merits, or perhaps the way it represents a sociological or ethical issue. The public, on the other hand, will rate a movie based simply upon how entertaining it is. Austin's conclusion, based on the aggregation of both consumer and critic scoring for films, is that the public may not be reliant on film critics when making choices on what to see. When it came to evaluating a film, the public seemed to understand that the professional critic viewed the film differently than they.

Film reviews were studied to determine their effect on both film interest and film evaluation (Wyatt & Badger, 1984). The authors found that movie critics could indeed be influential, at least as far as public appreciation of a film was concerned. Reading positive reviews before viewing a film could boost both the interest in seeing it and the movie-goer's own review of the film afterwards. However, this effect only works within limited bounds, as the authors state clearly: "Reviews cannot override natural predispositions completely" especially if

the reviews fall on the extreme ends of the spectrum (whether positive or negative). This is

somewhat at odds with Austin's (1983) findings, and the difference between these two views

leaves the scholar wondering just how the critic interacts with the consumer.

Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) conducted research aimed at answering this question. In

attempting to qualify the effect that movie critics had on theater attendance, they proposed that

the critic plays one of two roles, the "predictor" or the "influencer." As a predictor, the critic

acts as a sort of representative of the audience. Under this model, magazine or newspaper

readers heed a critic because they believe the critic best represents the taste of the audience. The

critic's predictive power is therefore solid–if the critic likes the movie, it is a safe bet that the

audience will too.

As an influencer, the critic is no longer a lens for public sentiment but instead acts as an

opinion leader via the two-step flow theory. In this model, critics wield a considerable amount

of power to make or break box office performance. This is similar to the elitist/snob theory that

Austin explores, insofar as it operates under the assumption that there really is a difference

between critic and consumer aesthetics. In order for the critic to operate as an influencer, the

public has to relinquish some trust in its own taste, which implies some level of inferiority (at

least, in artistic sensibility) when compared to the critic. However, the box office data pointed to

the critic as a predictor, as opposed to an influencer (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997), chiefly

because empirical findings showed that box office numbers for a well-reviewed movie stayed

flat at the film's release.

Building off of the Eliashberg and Shugan's model, Basuroy et al. (2003) present a

contradictory finding. By widening the sample size, and by examining longer box office periods,

the authors conclude that movie reviewers can act both as predictors and influencers, depending largely on the audience. They do note that the impact of negative reviews declines over time, which suggests that critics are more influential than predictive. In addition, the authors provide data showing that famous film stars and big budgets can act as "insurance policies" against a poorly reviewed movie. This idea has been shown to work in advertising, and in generating corporate credibility (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000). In addition, large amounts of advertising have been shown to act as "signalers" of a movie's quality (Basuroy & Talukdar, 2006) and, therefore, how the film could be received by audiences. When it comes to films, both advertising dollars and positive critical reviews can drive up film-goer attendance (Moon, Bergey, & Iacobucci, 2010), but the latter includes more than professional critics. Consumers and so-called "amateur" critic groups can also impact the success of a movie, measured in both box office numbers and film ratings.

It is the Internet that makes this last point particularly salient to the question of the critic's power. New technology allows filmgoers from all over the world to see a movie, review it, and most importantly, share that review. As a potential audience member, anyone can read these amateur reviews, and it remains to be seen just how these types of reviews affect the public perception of a film, or the attendance decision of a patron. Several studies have shown that word-of-mouth reviewing–essentially the arena of the regular consumer and the amateur critic– can have an effect on a film's performance (Chakravartya, Yong, & Mazumdarc, 2010; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Yong, 2006). However, these do not necessarily operate in the way that Eliashberg and Shugan (1997) originally hypothesized.

Yong examined an online database of amateur film reviews from Yahoo! Movies, and concluded several things. First, pre-release hype ("buzz") could significantly drive up peoples' expectations of the film's quality, but after the film was released, the public would become much more critical. Second, the explanatory power of online reviews was only marginally related to the content of the actual review; whether a review was good or bad seemed to be almost irrelevant, and what matters the most is the volume of reviews. This finding was replicated by Duan et al. (2008), and further refined to explain the relationship between online reviews and box office success. The authors note that, like Yong's study, the data indicates no real correlation between the content of the amateur review and box office attendance. Instead, the *volume* of reviews serves as an indicator by which to judge the intensity of word-of-mouth response to the film in question. According to the data, high review volume correlates with increased attendance, and actual review content does not seem to matter.

The birth of the Internet, and the subsequent proliferation of amateur movie reviews, has not put the professional critic out of business. In fact, it appears that sites like Yahoo! Movies are a boon to filmmakers in that more attention paid to the film means higher attendance. Filmmakers do not have to worry about bad reviews, or at least they do not have to worry much.

Despite the large amount of research done on film critics, film audiences, user reviews, and consumer responses to these sources of information, there is little to no data on these mechanisms in the video game industry. The findings produced from studying films may not be applicable to games for several reasons, with the studies conducted by Hu et al. (2008) and Duan et al.(2008) providing a clear explanation as to why. These two studies suggest that there are at least two ways to categorize video games. If games are viewed as a product, like books or

DVDs, then the Hu study might be applicable. If games are viewed as an experience, the Duan

study would suggest that negative user reviews do not hurt game sales, and enough of them

could even help. These studies, combined with data provided by Basuroy et al. (2003), show that

the interaction between professional critics, amateur critics, and gamers is not fully understood;

not just because all three studies are silent on games, but also because they offer contradictory

views on how critics (of any kind) influence consumers. Under the Basuroy et al. model,

professional game critics could be acting as influencers, predictors, or both. And depending on

how games are viewed by consumers, Duan or Hu could be used to explain how consumers use

amateur user reviews, or even if they use them at all.

Simply put, the research done on movie critics and audience responses is not immediately

applicable to video games because the two fields are only superficially similar. Movies–despite

the rising costs of attendance–are still relatively cheap when compared to the price gamers pay

for games, which are steadily rising in amount and now reach into the $60 range (Wired, 2012).

Films are also much shorter, as video games readily provide hours of entertainment.   Due to the

price and expenditure of time involved, video games could very well be a much larger

investment for the consumer, which has potential implications for their reliance on reviews.

When it comes to video games, there has been very little research done on whether or not

critical evaluations of games can steer customer interest and sales. According to a report

prepared by the Electronic Software Association (ESA), there are several reasons why

consumers purchase games: a good storyline, good graphics, as a sequel to another game, and

word-of-mouth ("Essential Facts," 2012). Two things become immediately apparent.

First, professional critics are conspicuously absent from this list. This is interesting, considering the size and presence of the video game review industry. As mentioned earlier, audiences are cognizant of the fact that movie critics may be concerned with "other things," and so critic's reviews are not given much weight when the consumer is deciding what to go see. For video games, there is no research describing how gamers feel about professional critics, or how they view professional critic reviews. According to the ESA study, gamers do not rely on reviews to buy games, but they do not elaborate on why. Non-use of professional critic reviews could be explained by a wide array of reasons, from a lack of trust to a lack of interest.

The second issue raised by the ESA data is that word-of-mouth apparently does affect gamers' purchase decisions. Of course, the (very large) caveat here is that we do not know what, precisely, "word-of-mouth" entails. If it means simply that gamers listen to other gamers of personal acquaintance, then Yong's (2006) work is not very helpful in figuring out the role of amateur reviews, because Yong counted the Yahoo! Movies website as word-of-mouth communication. However, if by word-of-mouth the ESA means what Yong describes–amateur critics writing on message boards and content aggregation websites–then the same conditions on amateur film reviews (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008) could apply to games.

The small amount of research conducted has shown that professional critic reviews can affect player evaluations ("The Influence," 2011). Gamers were given a selection of reviews to be read before playing a game, and the evidence suggests that, like Wyatt and Badger's (1984) study on audience responses to critical evaluations, a good game review can drive up player evaluation of the game. Likewise, a bad review can influence the player's evaluation of the game, and they will be more likely to give a lower rating. The authors of the EEDAR study

attempt to explain the critic's effect on the consumer by invoking anchoring theory (Furnam & Boo, 2011; McElroy & Dowd, 2007; Strack & Mussweiler, 1997). Anchoring has many applications, but the EEDAR authors suggest that people's exposure to previous reference points will influence their decisions, and that like movie reviews, video game reviews could act as priming agents to push a consumer in one direction or another. Like Eliashberg and Shugan's (1997) model, the EEDAR study implies that professional game critics are acting as influencers. They could also be acting as predictors, but to date no study similar to Basuroy et al. (2003) has been conducted to determine this.

One-step flow theory (Bennett & Manheim, 2006) offers another possible explanation for the role of professional critics in the game industry. In presenting this theory, the authors argue that the changing landscape of information dissemination has obviated the need for opinion leaders. They argue this superficially in the context of politics, but it has wider applications. With the advent of targeted marketing, mass media outlets are able to appeal directly to the consumer they want to reach. In this sense, the professional critic may not be acting as an opinion leader at all, and instead simply serves to reinforce the consumer's latent beliefs about a product.

It is clear that video games require their own frameworks from which to study game criticism and consumer responses. These responses range in content, from gamers' feelings about critics both professional and amateur, their level of trust in those critics, why they read game criticism, and how all of these variables potentially affect purchasing decisions. The following research questions are posed to gain data on these variables:

RQ1: To what extent do gamers say they use professional and user reviews to make video game purchasing decisions, and is this reliance related to their stated perceptions of professional critics and users?

RQ2: What is the relationship between the time and money spent on games and the gamer's stated reliance on professional and user reviews for purchasing decisions?

RQ3: What is the relationship between the types of games played and the platforms used, and the gamer's stated reliance on professional and user reviews for purchasing decisions?

RQ4: What are the differences between amateur review site visitation habits, and those visitors' preference for either user reviews, or professional reviews?

Method

Participants

The information required for answering the RQs was obtained through a survey (see Appendix), which was distributed through several avenues to include email solicitation to students, and solicitation via various web-based video gaming forums. The latter included Obsidian Entertainment's User Forums, as well as the official chat group for InXile Entertainment. In all cases, respondents were given a link to the survey, which was hosted by the Rochester Institute of Technology's Clipboard program. After the surveys were collected, tests indicated that there were no duplicate survey takers.

Terms and Variables

The following terms were used and described to the survey respondents:

*Professional Critic***:** Reviewers who appear on entertainment websites or in print magazines, and who are paid to provide, or make money by providing, game reviews/ratings.

*Users***:** Reviewers who provide reviews/ratings on review aggregation websites like Metacritic.com or Gamerrankings.com, or their own personal blogs or websites, without the expectation of making a profit.

In addition, distinctions were drawn between such variables as time spent playing video games, money spent on game purchases, genre of games most frequently played, reliance on video game reviews for purchasing decisions, and opinions/beliefs on the professional and amateur video game reviewing communities.

Research Question 1 was answered by data provided from survey questions 12, 13, and 16. Question 12 assesses the respondents' attitudes towards both professional critics and users, and the reviews produced by each. It contains attitude and belief statements on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). For example, one of the statements posed in this question is "User reviews cannot be trusted because I don't know who is writing the reviews." Question 13 asks the respondents to report their behavior when it comes to reading reviews and incorporating them into purchasing decisions, and the responses range from 1 (*always*) to 5 (*never*). Finally, question 16 asks respondents to pick which group's reviews they find most useful: critics, users, both, or neither.

Research Question 2 was answered by data provided from questions 1-3, which was used to determine the amount of money and time spent playing games. Questions 4-8 were asked to assess how often the respondents read various game review outlets, on a scale of 1 (*daily*) to 5 (*never*). Data from questions 13-16 was used to determine how often respondents use video game reviews to aid in purchasing decisions. The importance of several features found in reviews is presented via a numerical scale, from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*).

Research Question 3 was answered by questions 9-10, which were used to assess the type of games played, and the platforms used. The same data used to answer RQ2, with regards to reliance on reviews, was used to answer the same half of RQ3.

Research Question 4 was answered by comparing answers from survey questions 6 and 16. Question 6 asked respondents to indicate how often they visited amateur review sites, from 1 (*always*) to 5 (*never*). These responses were then compared to the answers for question 16, which asks respondents which group's reviews they find more useful: critics, users, both, or neither.

Results and Discussion

In total, there were 146 respondents to the survey. The median time spent playing video games for each respondent was between eight and 12 hours per week. They purchased on average one game in the last week prior to taking the survey, and spent a median amount between $0 and $20 on game purchases in that same time period.

The median age of the gamers who completed the survey was between 25 and 30, and median level of education was a Bachelor's degree. The average yearly income of the respondents was under $25,000. One hundred fourteen (78.1%) of the respondents identified as male, 30 (20.5%) identified as female, and two (1.4%) did not respond.

The survey also asked about viewing habits with regards to both amateur and professional critic websites, blogs, and features. When asked how often they read amateur gaming blogs and websites, the most common response was "rarely." Similarly, when asked how often they visited review aggregator sites such as Metacritic.com, the median response

category was also "rarely," and the median response for reading game reviews found on sites like Metacritic.com was "rarely."

Finally, the median number of video game websites visited by the respondents in the last week–to include sites such as IGN.com, Destructoid, and Rock, Paper, Shotgun–was one.

Regarding RQ2, there was no significant relationship found between both the time and money spent on games, and the gamer's stated reliance on professional and user reviews for making purchasing decisions.

This is particularly interesting. A person might assume that the gamer who is pressed for time or money may be more likely to rely on professional and user reviews in order to make a purchasing decision–even in the best of times, consumers do not like to waste money–and a gamer pressed for time may not want to spend a few hours with a particular product before he or she realizes they don't like it. It seems that reading reviews would provide an opportunity for a gamer in this situation to make a better, more informed decision, but the present results fail to make this case.

There are several possible explanations for this behavior, chief among them being that even those gamers who are pressed for time or money are reading reviews on games they are already likely to purchase. The outcome of the review could therefore have little to do with their eventual decision to purchase the game. Another explanation is that a person's willingness to spend time or money on games is not related to their knowledge of game reviews, game criticism, or gaming culture. Alternatively, gamers may be making purchasing decisions based on professional and user reviews, but these decisions are not connected to concerns about time spent playing, or the amount spent on those purchases.

This preference for users over professionals is especially interesting in light of the data

used to answer RQ1. The first part of RQ1 seeks to determine how important user and critic

reviews were to a respondent's decision to ultimately buy a game. The respondents were given

two statements: "I make reading critic reviews an important part of my decision to buy a game,"

and "I make reading user reviews an important part of my decision to buy a game." They were

then asked to indicate how often they did this, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Usage of Reviews in Purchasing

Frequency	Critic Reviews		Amateur Reviews		
	%	*n*	%	*n*	
Never	26.7	39	19.2	28	
Sometimes	22.6	33	21.2	31	
Half the time	22.6	33	26.0	38	
Usually	17.8	26	23.3	34	
Always	7.5	11	8.2	12	

The data indicate that there is a broad spread among gamers with regards to how often they make

professional and user reviews a part of their purchasing decisions, but that the usage of amateur

reviews in making purchase decisions does slightly edge out the usage of critic reviews in

several categories.

To answer the second part of RQ1, the survey asked 11 questions aimed at determining

respondents' beliefs about those professional critics, and nine questions about amateur user

reviewers. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, there were several statistically significant relationships

between gamers' reliance on professional and user reviews to make purchasing decisions, and

their beliefs about professional critics and amateur users.

Table 3

Belief/Attitude: User Reviews

I Make Reading User Reviews an Important Part of My Decision to Buy a Game	r	p
User reviews are reliable sources of information for video games	0.316	< 0.001
I have more in common with regular users than professional critics	0.258	0.002
User reviews give me valuable information that I don't get from professional critic reviews	0.351	< 0.001
User reviews are no good because they are mostly just complaining	-0.238	0.005
I try to read user reviews of a game before purchasing it	0.818	< 0.001

Table 4

Belief/Attitude: Critic Reviews

I Make Reading Critic Reviews an Important Part of My Decision to Buy a Game	r	p
Professional critic reviews are reliable sources of information for video games	0.415	< 0.001
Professional critics get paid to write reviews; therefore, they cannot be trusted	-0.305	< 0.001
Professional critics don't care about the same things I care about in a game	-0.390	< 0.001
Professional critics are snobs	-0.401	< 0.001
Professional critics know a lot about video games	0.392	< 0.001
Most professional critics are good writers	0.319	< 0.001
I try to read professional critic reviews of a game before purchasing it	0.797	< 0.001

As shown, there are several instances where a statistically significant correlation exists between a person's favorable view of a critic or user, and their stated willingness to incorporate the review into a purchasing decision. This is despite the fact that most respondents only read reviews "rarely." In most cases, the respondents have favorable views of both professionals and amateurs. For example, only 13.7% of the respondents agreed that professional critics were too picky, and only 19.1% agreed with the statement "Professional Critics are snobs."

Likewise, respondents had mostly favorable views of amateur critics when asked similar questions. For example, 50% of respondents disagreed with the statement that "User reviews cannot be trusted because I don't know who is writing the reviews." Another 23.3% offered a neutral response, and only 21.9% agreed with the statement.

RQ3 seeks to understand the relationship between the types of games played and the platforms used to play them, and any stated reliance on professional or user reviews for making purchasing decisions. In all cases but one, there was no statistically significant relationship between either the type of game played or the platform used, and that reliance (see Table 5).

Respondents were given a wide selection of game genres to choose from, with simple Yes/No answers on whether they played them. The categories were sports games, shooters, role-playing games, strategy games, adventure games, puzzle games, and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs).

Table 5

Game Type and Platform Used

Game Type	Play		Game Platform	Used	
	%	*n*		%	*n*
Sports Games	6.2	9	Personal Computer	78.1	114
Shooters	45.2	66	Laptop/Notebook	47.9	70
Role Playing Games	79.5	116	Xbox 360	43.2	63
Strategy Games	55.5	81	Playstation 3	34.2	50
Adventure Games	50.0	73	Wii	24.0	35
Puzzle	24.0	35	Portable Game	23.3	34
MMO	28.8	42	Mobile Device	37.0	54

As can be seen from the data, the most popular genre and platform are role playing games and personal computers, respectively, and by a large margin for each.

The lack of a relationship between the genre/platform and the reliance on reviews is revealing, because like those gamers who have limited time or money to spend on games, there are different levels of investment (in both time and money) depending on the genre or platform.

For example, games for consoles routinely run into the $60 range, whereas mobile games can be as inexpensive as $0.99, or in some cases even free. But apparently, the increased risk of spending more money on a "bad" game is not a strong enough inducement to create higher utilization of reviews.

Perhaps even more interesting is the strategy game genre that *did* show a statistically significant relationship (.002) with a fairly weak correlation ($r = .253$) to a reliance on user reviews to help a purchasing decision.

Out of all the game genres listed, strategy games are perhaps the most confined to a personal computer. They often have deep, complex interfaces that require the interactive flexibility that only a mouse and a keyboard can provide. They also have dozens, if not hundreds, of interlocking game mechanics, systems, and subsystems. In essence, strategy games can be incredibly complex and could be the outlier here because gamers really do want more information on them before they make a purchase.

For RQ4, a chi square test was run to determine what differences, if any, there were between amateur review site visitation habits and the usefulness of critic reviews, user reviews, or both, for those respondents. No statistically significant differences were found between the visitation habits and the preference of one critic group over the other.

Earlier research ("Essential Facts," 2012) has shown that things like a word-of-mouth can impact a person's willingness to buy a game. The data used to answer RQ4 also provides some insight here, as there seems to be a large preference for user reviews over professional critic reviews, by a factor of more than double. In this regard, previous work on word-of-mouth advertising for movies or products may be applicable to video games, as the data here indicates a similar trend: When asked how useful they found critics and users in making purchasing decisions, 30.1% indicated they found user reviews to be more useful, whereas only 14.4% said critics were more useful, 37.7% indicated that both were equally useful, and 14.4% stated that neither was useful. In addition, 60.9% of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed that user

reviews gave them useful information about games that professional critics did not supply. There is a clear preference among respondents for user reviews. This preference for user reviews might be related to phenomenon that Yong (2006) and Duan et al. (2008) discuss when it comes to the power of online, individual reviews–the volume of reviews, whether good or bad, could be acting as a signaler to readers that the game is worth their attention.

A preliminary explanation for RQ4's findings suggests that the frequency of visiting these amateur review sites does not impact the degree to which a user will find the reviews they read useful. This is interesting because a natural assumption would be that the frequency by which a person visits these sites is an indication of how useful they find them, or vice versa. The fact that more exposure to amateur review sites does not impact the preference for amateur reviews, combined with the higher preference for user reviews, presents an interesting question as to how or why respondents factor those reviews into their purchasing decisions in the first place.

Summary

The present study's findings reveal that there are no definite indicators of how a gamer will engage with, use, or react to reviews of games from either critics or amateurs. The survey responses give every indication that lack of engagement with reviewers is not an image problem; that is, professional critics are not viewed unfavorably, and the survey answers to some rather contentious belief statements fail to reveal any evaluative gap à la the elitist/snob theory. The survey answers indicate that the respondents do not believe professional game critics to be snobs, and the answers indicate that gamers believe they and critics share similar attitudes about what makes a good game.

Further, the results of this study indicate that game reviews may not follow the model for online purchases of products. User reviews for games are a trusted source of information, but unlike products available through various marketplaces, gamers are not necessarily making purchasing decisions based on what they read. Instead, the answers to RQ4 provide some evidence that games could be treated like films, insofar as how user reviews are examined.

While the work done by EEDAR shows clearly that critical reviews have an effect on people's perception of the game, and the ESA's own research shows that word-of-mouth is a major player in the gamer's ultimate decision to buy a game, this study shows that game reviews are not solid drivers of purchasing decisions. They are only read rarely, and there is a considerable preference for user reviews over critic reviews when respondents are asked which group, amateur or professional, is most useful.

And in fact, the most unexpected result from this research was the preference of user reviews over critic reviews by a factor of almost double when respondents had a choice between the two. It is important to note that the wording of the question concerns usefulness, and this is an important distinction. Gamers might be *appreciative* of both sources, but find the user review more *useful*.

This speaks to a possible connection to the work conducted by Yong (2006) and Duan et al. (2008), insofar as it suggests that video game reviews by amateur users function in a similar way to that of movie reviews by moviegoers, by explaining them as functions of word-of-mouth advertising. Out of all of the possible models presented in this research, the above mentioned model seems to best explain the data that was found to be significant: the preference for user reviews over professional reviews with regards to "usefulness," even though both are held in

fairly high regard by those same respondents. User reviews could also be signaling a high

amount of product "buzz" or anticipation.

This research was not able to add much information to Eliasberg and Shugan's (1997)

predictor/influencer model, except to note the unsurprising fact that professional reviews do get

included into some gamer's decisions to buy games. Eliasberg and Shugan were focused on

professional critic reviews and box office success, but since this study did not address game

"success" per se, their work is not directly applicable in this area.

Finally, this research sheds a bit of light on the evaluative gap demonstrated in Table 1.

While the respondents did, in general, have nice things to say about professional critics, their

responses to statements that user reviews are more useful then professional reviews adds some

weight to the evaluative gap. Game publishers and magazines should realize that the evaluative

gap is real for some games–and since some portion of gamers find user reviews more useful, that

gap could be indicative of lost sales. In other words, if user reviews are viewed as more useful,

and those reviews are none too kind to a particular game, the game publisher is likely looking at

lost revenue. Understanding this evaluative gap could aid publishers and magazines in "fixing"

certain parts of games, and also sharpen their ability to respond to user criticism in a way that

can mitigate damage to their reputations or brands.

Limitations and Further Research

The limitations to this study are owed to sampling methods and terminology. The data

collected by this study is heavily skewed towards gamers who prefer role-playing games, and

that is because the survey was distributed to a large degree on gaming internet forums dedicated

to role-playing games. The study also faces the traditional limitations found in self-reported data.

Future research in this area should seek to find a broad-based population of gamers from which to draw a sample. This may be difficult, as the nature of Internet discussion boards and other social media initiatives hinge upon the idea of shared interests.

Another potential limitation with this study could be found in the terminology. Separating professional critics from amateur users may be a difficult task, as these fields may frequently overlap. With the rise of social media and the open nature of many message boards and commenting systems, it may be difficult to decide who is a professional and who is an amateur. One of the questions this study sought to answer was related to the word-of-mouth model of product endorsements by users on sites like Amazon.com, but these sites have been plagued recently by accusations that fake user reviews abound. When companies are willing to pay money for fake social media advertising, it throws the entire commenting system into disarray. It could very well be that in the future, gamers will be less likely to trust amateur reviews from users because they will have no way of knowing if they are "plants." Indeed, it is interesting that, even though the pervasiveness of fake reviews is common knowledge, respondents still showed a clear preference for user reviews when they were forced to choose.

Further research could focus on gamers' perceptions of this industry practice, and whether or not they feel it affects the quality or trustworthiness of user reviews. By getting a more representative sample of gamers, researchers may also be able to rule out confounding influences on the relationship between platform and review preference. For example, this study

is heavily weighted towards personal computer users; a larger proportion of console gamers could have an effect on the results.

Finally, further research could be conducted on the relationship between game sales and reviews. The video game industry is very often proprietary with sales numbers, and does not release them to the public unless they are doing so to garner attention for a game that has sold well. For truly unbiased sales figures for video games, researchers would likely need to pay for the services of a market research company such as the NPD Group. With this information in hand, it would be possible to chart a relationship (if any exists) between user reviews and sales performance.

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APPENDIX: Survey Instrument

Critics and Consumers: How Gamers Use Game Reviews

We are interested in learning about how you feel about video games, game journalism, and video game reviewing in general. First, we will ask you about your gaming and reading habits. Then we will make some statements, and ask you to choose whether or not you agree with them. Finally, some demographic information will be collected at the end. This survey should take no more than 10 minutes of your time. **This survey is anonymous, and the results will be kept confidential.**

Before you get started, here are some definitions to keep in mind:

Professional critic reviews are any reviews that appear on gaming websites or in magazines, and are written by paid review writers.

User reviews are any reviews written by non-professionals. These reviews appear on personal blogs and websites, review sites like Metacritic.com, and shopping sites like Amazon.com.

PART I In this section we ask questions about your playing and reading habits.

1. During the past seven days, how much time did you spend playing video games?

○ Less than 4 hours
○ At least 4 hours but less than 8 hours
○ At least 8 hours but less than 12 hours
○ At least 12 hours but less than 16 hours
○ More than 16 hours

2. During the past four weeks, how many games did you purchase?

○ 0
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5
○ 6
○ 7 or more

3. During the past four weeks, how much money did you spend to purchase video games?

○ $0- $20
○ $21- $50
○ $51 - $80
○ $81- $110
○ More than $110

4. How many video game magazines do you have PAID subscriptions for? Examples include PC Gamer, XBox Magazine, and Game Informer.

- ○ 0
- ○ 1
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4
- ○ More than 5

5. During the past four weeks, which of these gaming websites did you visit? Check all that apply.

- ☐ IGN
- ☐ Game Trailers
- ☐ GamesRadar
- ☐ Joystiq
- ☐ UGO
- ☐ Gamespot
- ☐ Kotaku
- ☐ 1Up
- ☐ Gamefront
- ☐ Destructoid
- ☐ GameFAQs
- ☐ Cheat CC
- ☐ Gamespy
- ☐ Giantbomb
- ☐ Escapist Magazine
- ☐ Other: [_____]

6. How often do you read amateur gaming blogs and websites?

- ○ Never
- ○ Rarely
- ○ Several times a month
- ○ Several times a week
- ○ Daily

7. How often do you visit video game review aggregator sites? Examples of these sites include Metacritic.com, Gamerrankings.com and Reviewtrax.com.

- ○ Never
- ○ Rarely
- ○ Several times a month
- ○ Several times a weeik
- ○ Daily

8. How often do you read non-professional user reviews for games? These include reviews found on gaming message forums, review sites like Metacritic.com, and user reviews from Amazon.com.

- ○ Never
- ○ Rarely
- ○ Several times a month
- ○ Several times a week
- ○ Daily

9. Which platforms do you use to play video games? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Personal Computer
- ☐ Laptop or Notebook
- ☐ X Box
- ☐ Playstation 3
- ☐ Wii
- ☐ Portable game systems (PSP/Vita, 3DS, etc)
- ☐ Mobile Devices (tablets, phones, etc)
- ☐ Other: _____

10. Which kinds of games do you play the most?

- ☐ Sports games
- ☐ Shooters
- ☐ Role playing games
- ☐ Strategy games
- ☐ Adventure games
- ☐ Puzzle
- ☐ Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO)
- ☐ Browser based games
- ☐ Online card games
- ☐ Space Simulation games
- ☐ Flight simulation games

11. How do you feel about the time you spend playing video games?

- ○ I wish I could spend more time playing video games
- ○ I am satisfied with the amount of time I get to play video games
- ○ I wish I spent less time playing video games

12.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Professional critic reviews are reliable sources of information for video games	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews are reliable sources of information for video games	○	○	○	○	○
Generally, professional video game critics and I have similar ideas as to what makes a great game	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics get paid to write reviews; therefore, they cannot be trusted	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics don't care about the same things I care about in a game	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews cannot be trusted because I don't know who is writing the reviews	○	○	○	○	○
I have more in common with regular users than professional critics	○	○	○	○	○
When deciding if I should buy a game, demos are more helpful than reviews	○	○	○	○	○
If there is a large disagreement between professional critic reviews and user reviews, the game is probably bad	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics give good reviews too easily	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics are too picky	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics are snobs	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews are better than professional reviews because the reviewers are not getting paid	○	○	○	○	○
Game companies and professional critics are too cozy with each other	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews give me valuable information that I don't get from professional critic reviews	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews are usually too harsh	○	○	○	○	○
User reviews are no good because they are mostly just complaining	○	○	○	○	○
If a user review is poorly written (bad spelling, poor grammar, etc) that means the review can't be trusted	○	○	○	○	○
Professional critics know a lot about video games	○	○	○	○	○
Most professional critics are good writers	○	○	○	○	○

PART III Now we'd like to ask you about some of your behaviors. Please indicate how often you engage in each behavior. Please note, there are no right or wrong answers.

13. Please indicate how often you engage in each listed behavior.

	Always	Usually	About Half The Time	Seldom	Never
I try to read professional critic reviews of a game before purchasing it	○	○	○	○	○
I try to read user reviews of a game before purchasing it	○	○	○	○	○
I make reading critic reviews an important part of my decision to buy a game	○	○	○	○	○
I make reading user reviews an important part of my decision to buy a game	○	○	○	○	○
When I read game reviews to help me decide what to buy, I will read more than one review.	○	○	○	○	○
When I am unsure about a game, I will wait for my friends to buy it first and then tell me about it	○	○	○	○	○
I will only buy a game if I am sure I will like it.	○	○	○	○	○
I read critic reviews after I buy and play a game, to see if I agree with the review.	○	○	○	○	○

14. What game aspects are you interested in when reading a professional critic review?

	Important	Moderately Important	Of Little Importance
Graphics	○	○	○
Voice Acting (if present)	○	○	○
Gameplay Mechanics	○	○	○
Story	○	○	○
Sound Quality	○	○	○
Reputation of the studio making the game	○	○	○
Whether or not the game is a sequel to one I enjoyed	○	○	○
Multiplayer capability	○	○	○
Game difficulty	○	○	○

15. Why do you read video game reviews? Check all that apply.

☐ To get information about an upcoming or newly released game
☐ To see what other people are saying about a game
☐ To see if I will like the game
☐ To get industry-wide news
☐ To see player reaction to a game
☐ To help me decide if I should purchase the game
☐ Other: _____

16. Which of the following is the MOST useful when deciding to buy a game?

○ User reviews
○ Critic reviews
○ They are both equally useful
○ Neither is useful

Part IV This part of the survey asks some personal questions about you. All of this information is confidential, and will not be shared with anyone.

17. What is your sex?

○ Male
○ Female

18. Hold old are you?

○ 18-24
○ 25-30
○ 31-35
○ 36-40
○ 41-45
○ 46-50
○ 51+

19. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

○ High school
○ College - 1st year
○ College - 2nd year
○ College - 3rd year
○ College - 4th year
○ Graduate/Professional
○ Ph. D

20. What is your average yearly income?

○ Under $25k
○ $25k - $39,999
○ $40k - $49,999
○ $50k - $74,999
○ $75k - $99,999
○ $100k - $124,999
○ Over $150,000