

“Here Comes a New Challenger”

Will Video Game Essays be the New Champion of Game Criticism?

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In the recent past, various authors have examined the change of tone within games journalism.¹ There seems to be not only a broader portfolio of topics which is covered by representatives of an elder, sometimes described as ‘classic’ games press (meant here: former and current print game magazines and their online outlets), but the medium itself is getting more and more attention beyond the circles of a tech-savvy and service-oriented trade as well as specialized press: Especially editors of literary and arts sections in more general news outlets started to treat digital games as objects/artifacts of cultural and public interest. Video games have become newsworthy—not only as a billion-dollar industry that brings in more revenue than other areas of the entertainment market or because of the moral debates triggered by

1 Cf. Inderst, R.: “Spannungsfeld Spielejournalismus: Von Testern und Träumern,” in: Koubeck, Jochen/Mosel, Michael/Werning, Stefan (eds.), *Spielkulturen: Funktionen und Bedeutungen des Phänomens Spiel in der Gegenwartskultur und im Alltagsdiskurs*. Glückstadt: vvh Verlag, 2013, pp. 173-185; cf. Görge, Arno et al.: *Von der verbotenen Liebe des Spielejournalismus und der Game Studies*, June 23, 2016; <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/1018>; cf. *Dossier Spiele & Journalismus*; <https://www.grimme-game.de/category/spiele-journalismus/>

depictions of violence or the supposed addictive potential in video games.² Digital games are getting more editorial space because journalists increasingly understand them as complex, cultural products that bring forth contrasts, tensions, and paradox situations that can be read as self-reflexive and political commentary.

In the following sections, I will talk about one of the younger forms of public reflection about video and computer games: the video essay. The starting point will be an introduction of the concept focusing upon video essays as a tool of film criticism, followed by a segment about prototypical challenges faced by artists and content creators. A closer look at three different video game essayists will then exemplify the diverse and differentiated portfolio of today's video game essays, including a critical glance at the market and essay production situation in Germany. The main part will close with elaborations on putting video game essays within a broader playfield of something that is often described as an ongoing online culture war, before concluding with possible profits for the field of game studies by implementing video game essays in their toolset.

VIDEO ESSAYS—HERE TO STAY?

In his introduction to video essays, media researcher Erlend Lavik explains this shape of criticism:

“Film criticism is a sweeping concept, ranging from amateur blogs to newspaper reviews to dense scholarly studies. [...] The burgeoning genre of the video essay commonly employs edited footage from the films under analysis in order to enrich and expand the function of criticism: to shed light on individual films, groups of films, or the cinema as an art form.”³

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- 2 Cf. Fisher, Sue: “Identifying Video Game Addiction in Children and Adolescents”, in: *Addictive Behaviors* 19/5 (1994), pp. 545-553; cf. Griffiths, Mark: “Violent Video Games and Aggression: A Review of the Literature”, in: *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 4/2 (1999), pp. 203-212.
 - 3 Lavik, Erlend: “The Video Essay: The Future of Academic Film and Television Criticism?” in: *Frames Cinema Journal*, July 2, 2012; <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-video-essay-the-future/>

Now, obviously, Lavik is talking about film and television criticism—but let us exchange and replace some of the key words in this quote:

“[Digital game] criticism is a sweeping concept, ranging from amateur blogs to newspaper reviews to dense scholarly studies. [...] The burgeoning genre of the video essay commonly employs edited footage from the [games] under analysis in order to enrich and expand the function of criticism: to shed light on individual [games], groups of [games], or [gaming] as an art form.”

At this early stage of this essay, this rhetorical sleight of hand is a useful tool to introduce the format. Video game essays have been influenced by video essays about films in their form and language: “This newer form of criticism emerged in around 2007 and was largely influenced by the work of director Kevin B. Lee, who published annotated parts of his films on the internet.”⁴

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME: PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND LEGAL MATTERS

The video essay can be understood as a structural enabler, as media researcher Matt Zoller Seitz explains:

“[W]ritten reviews of print media always had a huge advantage over all other reviews in terms of their ability to quote bits and pieces of the thing being written about. [...] In contrast, a film reviewer trying to describe the style of Martin Scorsese would have to rely on approximations [...]. But the one thing they couldn't do was quote—really quote—the object of criticism [...].”⁵

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- 4 van den Berg, Thomas/Kiss, Miklos: “Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video,” in: *The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture*, July, 2016; <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/index>
 - 5 Seitz, Matt Z.: “The Video Essay,” in: *Kunst der Vermittlung*; <https://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de/dossiers/internet-weblogs/matt-zoller-seitz-video-essay/>

These “audiovisual forms of film criticism made by new kinds of filmmaker-critics”⁶ are part of a technological transformation that took place on two levels: production and distribution. Being short videos themselves, video essays presenting viewpoints and arguments about movies/TV series by using source footage (sequences or still shots), voice-over commentaries, and sub-or intertitles got off the ground with the development of high-performance hardware as well as powerful video editing software and their arrival at end-user-friendly costs. Being able to edit digital source material and reconfigure it into a new narrative chronology about possible interplays of aesthetic, cultural, and economic aspects has opened up a new way to express and form opinions “with an opportunity to augment and perhaps even decentre the dominance of text-based criticism.”⁷ Having finalized their final cut, practitioners, curators, scholars, and teachers alike who want to present their recent videographic work have to think about the next step—this is where the question of distribution comes into play. Without the online video platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or Fandor on the one hand and the cost-effective as well as fast data access infrastructure—especially on mobile phones—it would be barely possible “for visual storytellers to explore new forms, new audiences and build new careers.”⁸

Now, when it comes to the specifics of the content, creators want to show to their online audience, there is a third keyword—after production and distribution—that is relevant in the process of manufacturing video essays: copyright. This term involves a legal challenge that is relevant to video essay makers on two levels—‘getting’ as well as editing their source material and distributing it to a public audience. This essay cannot measure out all the different legal implications that are interconnected to the circumstances. I would point to the term ‘fair use’ though, in order to establish a basic understanding.

6 Grant, Catherine: “The Video Essay as Liquid Criticism: Short Films on Film,” in: *Uppsala Short Film Festival 2020*; <http://www.shortfilmfestival.com/en/programs/special-programme/video-essays/>

7 McWhirter, Andrew: “Film Criticism, Film Scholarship and the Video Essay”, in: *Screen* 56/3 (2015), pp. 369-377.

8 Warren, Matt: “Exploring the Video Essay Form with Polyphonic’s Noah Lefevre,” in: *Film Independent*, April 19, 2018; <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/exploring-video-essay-form-polyphonics-noah-lefevre/>

In his introduction to this challenging topic, *The Ultimate Guide to Fair Use and Copyrights for Filmmakers*, video producer and author Ron Dawson describes fair use as “a legal doctrine that promotes freedom of expression by permitting the unlicensed use of copyright-protected works in certain circumstances.” He further states that certain types of use—“such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research”⁹—may be considered as examples for fair use. Dawson then elaborates:

“[V]ideo essays are the quintessential example of fair use in terms of both education and critical commentary. [...] Based on the transformative use, the amount of the copyrighted material used, and the fact that this use is not hurting the commercial viability of the copyright holders, they are protected.”¹⁰

But he also adds that these rules are not clear cut but “relatively open to interpretation, and unless you’re actually sued or challenged, you may never know 100% whether your use adheres to the law or not.”¹¹ It is, therefore, an acceptable conclusion at this point to summarize the legal *mélange* for video essay makers and producers as a greyish area between the willingness to express oneself and possible copyright strikes of certain stakeholders and third parties involved.

Now, let us circle back to video game essays. I have established them as a form of filmic examination with video and computer games involving the game’s ongoing screen action as the initial situation/position for a visual orientated mode of representation and topic development.¹² Whether you understand game studies as a mere research field or an emergent discipline—video game essays have the potential to be many things at the same time: They can become a new approach in hybrid academic teaching, a new form of scientific publication taken into consideration the late dawn of a digital

9 Dawson, Ron: “The Ultimate Guide to Fair Use and Copyrights for Filmmakers,” in: *Frame.io Insider*, August 30, 2017; <https://blog.frame.io/2017/08/30/copyrights-and-fair-use-for-filmmakers/>

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Cf. Biermann, Ralf: “Video Game (Film-) Essays: Der (etwas andere) Einsatz von Computerspielen zur Unterstützung von Lernprozessen,” in: *MedienPädagogik. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Medienbildung* 15-16 (2009) pp. 1-14.

age, as well as a new research apparatus. The project *Video Essay: Futures of Audiovisual Research and Teaching* underlines the possibilities of video essays, including—in my understanding—video games:

“Video essays turn sound and images [and gameplay] into critical devices which reflect upon their own function, production, and implications. In doing so video essays combine the analytical with the aesthetic, scientific methods with artistic practice.”¹³

There is also another argument to be made here—one that is overlooked easily within the daily doings of research: its communication to a broader public. I would argue that video game essays could be a solid bridge from casual viewers to the field of game studies. This new type of game criticism could open the road to a growth of interest of questions and issues that are integral parts of game research agendas worldwide. Therefore, video game essays are possible door-openers fostering media and game literacy and could even be labeled as entities of an unbudgeted science communications campaign.

In the following section, I will take a close look at three selected video game essays from different makers in order to show the broad range of topics discussed.¹⁴ It will also be of interest to narrow down and examine the individual style of the creators. According to Matt Zoller Seitz, “[i]t is already possible (already!) to see a snippet of one of Kevin B. Lee’s videos from the other side of the room with the sound off and say, ‘That’s got to be Kevin.’”¹⁵ The three channels to be examined are: *Games as Literature*, *Ahoy*, and *Red Angel*.

13 Cf. <https://blog.hslu.ch/videoessay/about/>

14 Referring to film critic Girish Shambu one may ask, whether some form of new *ludophilia* is manifesting itself in these essays about digital games—a *ludophilia* which “wants to multiply a diversity of voices and subjectivities, and a plethora of narratives [...]” Shambu, Girish: “For a New Cinephilia,” in: *Film Quarterly* 72/3, February 27, 2019, <https://filmquarterly.org/2019/02/27/manifesto-eleven-calls-to-action/#newcinephilia>

15 Seitz, M. Zoller: *The Video Essay*. Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker, media artist, critic and teacher and has created over 360 video essays for online video channels, festivals and crossmedia platforms.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THREE VIDEO CHANNELS

Games as Literature is a US-based YouTube channel with almost 35k subscribers and 180 videos online that started broadcasting five years ago.¹⁶ The channel's protagonist introduces himself as the Game Professor. Following the stereotypical depiction of academia, his visual set-up is placing him in a huge chair in front of a large blackboard full of chalk notes. His clothing style can be described as rather conservative with a twist: The Game Professor is wearing a dark unspectacular jacket with a striking colorful tie which resembles an 8-bit-pixel aesthetic. The Game Professor's main intention can be looked up on his crowdfunding website—he wants

“to create an actual curriculum, a real way for schools to teach kids how to appreciate and interpret video games. In the meantime, I'm contributing what I can to the discourse of interactive narrative study through this webseries. In short, I want to play a part in improving the understanding and presence of video games in the academic space.”¹⁷

In terms of content, the Game Professor is claiming to offer several perspectives and approaches:

“WHAT IS GAMES AS LIT.101? It's a variety of different things! Sometimes it's a game review series, with brief discussions about whatever games I've been playing lately. Sometimes it's a look into a specific topic, like how a certain video game tells its story or what's going on in video game culture. But most importantly, it's occasional in-depth examination of a particular video game, what it means, and how it uses its interactive properties to tell its story [my emphasis].”¹⁸

As the name of channel already suggests, the Game Professor's understanding of digital games is that of a ‘text,’ implying hereby that video and computer games—when understood as complex, pop-cultural products—bring forth contrasts, tensions, and paradox situations that can be *read* as self-

16 Games as Literature; <https://www.youtube.com/user/gamesasliterature/>

17 <https://www.patreon.com/gamesaslit101>

18 Ibid.

reflexive meta-medial comments.¹⁹ The Game Professor is very active on Twitter, where he not only promotes his channel but also appears as an outspoken-political discourse participant showing a strong anti-Trump mindset; he also frequently is discussing topics such as the interlinks between religion and sexuality. It can be assumed that the creator behind the persona “the Game Professor” is deepening his political swathes as a spill-over: On this channel, he also deep dives into topics such as ‘female agency’ and is deconstructing the right-wing slogan ‘Keep Politics Out of Games!’

The UK-based YouTube channel *Ahoy* joined the platform back in 2009 and has a huge subscriber base: Almost 1.4 million viewers do follow *Ahoy*’s “insightful gaming videos” and have watched his 283 videos.²⁰ Like *Games as Literature*, Stuart Brown—the maker behind *Ahoy*—is taking advantage of crowdfunding. His Patreon account shall secure a steady flow of income, making it possible for him to work full-time on his project. In his self-description, his targeted supporters learn:

“I produce documentary-style video content about video games and their impact on culture: history, influence and artefacts of design. As a one man team, I’m responsible for all aspects of production: script-writing, graphics, voiceover, gameplay recording, editing and music.”²¹

One of *Ahoy*’s most successful playlists is called *Iconic Arms*. It has gained the attention of over 2,2 million views and includes 21 videos so far—the concept behind this playlist is the visual interesting and informative presentation of “[I]egendary weapons of FPS history” following their historical roots in the actual armaments industry. Given that Brown has been an active video creator for over ten years now, it is not too surprising that his works have drawn the attention of writers and producers who are interested in video essays; Jeremy Kaye from the video platform *Series of the Week* describes Brown’s works as follows: “His video essays are presented with a distinct visual style, and go beyond typical gaming content to showcase a historical perspective that draws interest from gamers and non-gamers alike” and

19 Cf. Inderst, Rudolf: *Die Darstellung von Wissenschaft im digitalen Spiel*, Glückstadt: vwh Verlag 2018, pp. 63-94.

20 *Ahoy*; <https://www.youtube.com/user/XboxAhoy>

21 <https://www.patreon.com/ahoy>

therefore labels him as one of several “filmmakers that have mastered the art of the Video Essay.”²² *Ahoy*’s contribution is also discussed by other YouTubers as well—*BluShades*, a channel with almost 45k subscribers, has produced a *laudatio* clip with the title *The Visual Nuances of Ahoy* seen by nearly 84k viewers.²³ *Ahoy* not only is a topic in English-speaking countries, German game researcher Christian Huberts also recommends Brown’s clip *The First Video Game* as “throughout [...] entertaining.”²⁴

The third channel I will be discussing here is *Red Angel*—the US-based YouTube channel is the smallest one in regard to the number of subscribers—almost 2,5k viewers do follow the creator; her self-description reads as follows:

“I make academic essay[s] or editorial-style videos about video games and other forms of media. Here you’ll see me discuss a variety of subjects relating to literature, philosophy, history, film, and television, over a backdrop of video games.”²⁵

Just like *Games as Literature* and *Ahoy*, *Red Angel* is using the crowdfunding platform in order to get financial support for her work: here, she also explains that one of her goals is to “critically analyze a piece of work, using research and sources from academic journals or something along those lines, and develop a large scale video essay format based around it.”²⁶ One of her most popular (not a single downvote) videos centers around the connection between death and photography in the critically acclaimed video game *LIFE IS*

22 Kaye, Jeremy: “5 Filmmakers That Have Mastered the Art of the Video Essay,” in: *Medium*, January 17, 2016; <https://medium.com/seriesoftheweek/5-filmmakers-that-have-mastered-the-art-of-the-video-essay-9667f7b2ee9c>

23 *BluShades*: *The Visual Nuances of Ahoy*, September 22, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BFvX_rzWV0

24 Huberts, Christian: “Was war das erste Videospiel? (Nein, nicht PONG),” in: *piqd*, October 7, 2019; <https://www.piqd.de/pop-kultur/was-war-das-erste-videospiel-nein-nicht-pong>

25 *Red Angel*; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCikpgADQdxYm6OH11Bhmmw/about>

26 <https://www.patreon.com/redangel>

STRANGE (2015).²⁷ *Red Angel* also is part of the now seemingly defunct YouTube roundtable *The Gaming Symposium*. There, she not only joined forces with the Game Professor, but also with another better-known US-based producer called *EmceeProphIt* (with 22,7k followers) who features a playlist called *Video Game Analysis* with 76 videos: “Games are a growing artistic medium, and they’ve been used to create some amazing satire, commentary and emotional epics.”²⁸

Red Angel was the only female member within the cast of *The Gaming Symposium*, and I think one should not dismiss this very circumstance as some sort of anecdotal evidence—au contraire, writer Meg Shields points out:

“I watch a lot of video essays. [...] [T] hey’re engaging, informative, thought-provoking, and tend to make their viewers more critical and appreciative cinema-goers. The gender disparity present in video essays is nothing new. It reflects a wider cultural disparity in film culture [...]”²⁹

She continues: “Written essays have been a ‘feminine’ medium for ages, from Joan Didion, to Susan Sontag, to Zadie Smith, to Roxane Gay. But video essays seem to take after the film industry’s gender bias.”³⁰ Although Shields is focusing on video essays reflecting movies and TV shows, the situation does not vary considerably when it comes to essays about video and computer games: game press articles or online forum threads that feature best-of lists regularly come up with the well-known male ‘usual suspects’ such as *Super Bunnyhop*, *Errant Signal*, *Gaming Historian* or Noah Caldwell-Gervais.³¹ In this regard, it can be assumed that right now, to the

27 Red Angel: *Death and Photography in Life is Strange*, May 8, 2016; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uduox3e_

28 EmceeProphIt: *Video Game Analysis [Playlist]*, June 9, 20212, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL259F47D4B6FA8555>

29 Shields, Meg: “Fantastic Video Essays by Women and Where to Find Them,” in: *Film School Rejects* (2018); <https://filmschoolrejects.com/fantastic-video-essays-women-find/>

30 Ibid.

31 TotalDimwitTheCynicalTwit: “The Best Video Game Critics On YouTube,” in: *Gaming Central* (2017); <https://gamingcentral.in/best-video-game-critics-youtub>

majority of the public, the domain of video essays might be “reflexive, subjective, autobiographic, poetic, interdisciplinary”³²—but it is also dominated by men.

PLAYING THE CULTURE WARS GAME

In the following section, I will discuss the aforementioned complex of problems as part of a larger whole. This complex can be read and labeled as a subset of a new form of culture war. Following Irene Taviss Thomson, this to be understood as “an outgrowth of characteristically American culture patterns. [...] Like earlier cultural politics, the contemporary culture wars take place within the parameters of some enduring cultural patterns.”³³ Thomson continues: “If the contemporary culture wars differ from those of the past, it is only because we have become increasingly aware of such contention and increasingly conscious of the tenuousness with which all cultural ideas are held.”³⁴ Her argument and derivation were published in 2010, and I will argue that now—a decade later—the awareness Thomson is talking about has to be recontextualized within the current ecosystem of social media. The reason is obvious—social media and online community platforms have become a ubiquitous and time-consuming constant in our lives:

“Since its inception in 1996, social media [...] platforms almost tripled their total user base in the last decade, from 970 million in 2010 to the number passing 3.81 billion

e/; “Best YouTube channels for gaming analysis/in depth discussion,” in: *NeoGAF* (2016); <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/best-youtube-channels-for-gaming-analysis-in-depth-discussion.1188455/>

32 Freeman, Marilyn: “On the Form of the Video Essay,” in: *TriQuarterly*; January 16, 2012; <https://www.triquarterly.org/essay/on-the-form-of-video-essay>

33 Thomson, Irene Taviss: “Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas,” in: *University of Michigan*, 2010; <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472070886-ch1.pdf>

34 Ibid.

users in 2020. [...] The average person has 8.6 social media accounts in 2020 [and] the average time a person spends on social media a day is 2 hours 24 minutes.”³⁵

Since most of the video game essayists can be found on YouTube, the platform can serve as a point of reference, putting the thought of a social marketplace of ideas into question. Already in 2010, YouTube stated, “that the number of videos watched daily at the website has broken the two-billion mark [...]”³⁶ Nine years later, though, YouTube has 2 billion users worldwide, 79 percent of internet users claim to have a YouTube account, they can browse YouTube in 80 different languages (which covers roughly 95 percent of the internet population), and every single day people watch one billion hours of videos on the platform hereby generating billions of views—“it would take you close to 82 years to watch the amount of videos uploaded to YouTube in only an hour.”³⁷

It is this specific discourse area in which video game essay creators who highlight cultural and political implications quickly will find themselves right in the middle of accusations, allegations, and aggressions from viewers /users as well as other video makers. To elaborate this challenge a bit further, one can turn to political scientist and editor for *Dissent* Nick Serpe, as he explains: “In the earlier days of the internet, content moderation was often driven by the whims of webmasters and volunteers deputized to decide what (and who) got banned.”³⁸ But nowadays, Serpe continues, their role has become much more significant: “They have been cast as central players in the fight for democracy, whether as its antagonists or its delinquent guardians.”³⁹

35 Dean, Brian: “Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?” in: *Backlinko*, April 02, 2021; <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>

36 Chapmann, Glenn: “YouTube Serving up Two Billion Videos Daily,” in: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2010; <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/youtube-serving-up-two-billion-videos-daily-20100517-v8sf.html>

37 Mohsin, Maryam: “10 Youtube Stats Every Marketer Should Know in 2020,” in: *Oberlo*, November 11, 2019; <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/youtube-statistics>

38 Serpe, Nick: “The New Tech Culture Wars,” in: *Dissent* (2019); <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-new-tech-culture-wars>

39 Ibid.

The most prominent example is Anita Sarkeesian and her highly successful video game essay series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, in which Sarkeesian aimed “to examine the plot devices and patterns most often associated with female characters in gaming from a systemic, big picture perspective.”⁴⁰ After her fundraising campaign to raise money in order to produce her web series, she began to receive “death threats, comments on her gender and race, and on Wikipedia, someone replaced her picture with a pornographic one. Then [...] rape threats were made against her.”⁴¹ Her case was a vivid and sudden reminder that “participatory culture [...] can as easily serve non-democratic as democratic purposes. [Her] harassment utilized the same platforms that encourage the sharing of remixes, videos, games, memes, tweets, blog posts, and so on.”⁴²

Another example of a video essayist to be mentioned in this context is Harry Brewis and his channel *hbombguy* (522k subscribers).⁴³ He was described by *The Guardian* as “a blow against online toxicity” and “an antidote to the worst of gaming culture”, aiming to provide “well-sourced and reasoned responses to the arguments of the far right [including] flat earthers, pick-up artists, advocates of the theory that soy makes men feminine.”⁴⁴ By not only covering games such as *BRAID* (2008), *FALLOUT 3* (2008), and *BLOODBORNE* (2015) or more typical game culture topics like speedrunning and gamergate, Brewis is opening up his channel to a broader audience interested in rather progressive and liberal positions within the current (social) media discourse. One could argue that this aforementioned conflict also can

40 https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61

41 Burke, Ronald J.: “Individual, Organizational, and Societal Backlash Against Women,” in: Burke, Ronald J./Major, Debra A. (eds.), *Gender in Organisations. Are Men Allies or Adversaries to Women’s Career Advancement?*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing 2014, pp. 335-365, here p. 335.

42 Massanari, Adrienne L.: “‘Damseling for Dollars’. Toxic Technoculture and Geek Masculinity,” in: Lind, Rebecca Ann (ed.): *Race, Gender in Electronic Media: Content, Context, Culture*. New York: Routledge 2016, p. 327.

43 <https://www.youtube.com/user/hbombguy>

44 Hawking, Tom: “How a 57-hour Donkey Kong Game Struck a Blow Against Online Toxicity,” in: *The Guardian*, January 22, 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/jan/22/how-a-57-hour-donkey-kong-twitch-stream-struck-a-blow-against-gamergate>

be described as a clash of different *game capital* formats. I follow game researcher Mia Consalvo in my understanding of the term as providing “a key way to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players.”⁴⁵ Gaming capital, referring to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his understanding of capital sorts, can be understood as a form of *cultural capital*, which, in our case, describes theoretical and practical knowledge about gaming itself, but also the ecosystem around it. One could argue that the actual re-emergence of a culture war in the YouTube and Twitch comment sections and on the different timelines of social media platforms is to be understood as a clash of gaming capital holders within a competitive playfield for meaning and significance.

In order to exemplify this, the question comes to mind whether the knowledge about the state of representation of ethnicity, class, or gender in video games does hold the same relevance as the knowledge about every magical crystal and its effect in a massive fantasy game world. In the case of what has been described as classical game criticism and game fan circles alike, the second type of knowledge has been rated as more significant to the ecosystem of gaming, whereas the first complex has been looked upon as some form of suspicious left-wing-media and scholarship politicization—being of only remote interest for the ludic sociotope. Even worse: The critical inquiring, frequently put forward by humanities research, has been read as a hostile attempt to manifest a climate of cancel culture, killing off the enjoyment, fun, and excitement of ‘just playing a game.’ This positional rivalry has turned, as shown above with gamergate, for instance, into brutish online maneuvers where both encampments do not hesitate to act and counteract via their social media appearances.

THE GERMAN-SPEAKING SITUATION OF VIDEO GAME ESSAYS

It is interesting for me—as a German-speaking game researcher—to see that there are high-quality German language podcasts available that deal with

45 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007, p. 4.

questions and perspectives of game studies: In *Poor Player*⁴⁶ game researchers Christian Huberts and Eric Jannot examine the role of poverty in digital games, in *Behind the Screens* podcast⁴⁷ game researchers Benjamin Strobel, Nicolas Hoberg as well as Jessica Kathmann focus upon the interconnection of psychology and video games, and there are already more than 200 episodes of *Pixeldiskurs*⁴⁸—a weekly format that seeks to interconnect game studies and culture journalism.⁴⁹

When it comes to video game essays in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, though, the overall situation can be described as developable. On the basis of three examples, light shall be shed on current circumstances. Alice Wolf, with her channel *Alice Wolf* (6,1k subscribers)⁵⁰, for example, is working at a German video game media outlet full-time and also takes care of her channel where she examines titles such as *HOLLOW KNIGHT* (2017), *RESIDENT EVIL 2* (2019) or *GRIS* (2018). In the earlier days, she also covered topics like the narratology versus ludology debate. Christian Eichler, a journalist, started a channel called *ah ok* (188 subscribers) in July 2019 after co-hosting a podcast called *Rush* (2017-2019) that had the following key questions: What's the societal relevance of digital games, and how can they be analyzed?⁵¹ Michael Schulze von Glaßer is an outspoken peace activist, public speaker, and book author. He created his channel *Games 'n' Politics* in 2013 (8,6k subscribers)⁵²—his last upload was back in 2015. On his Patreon page, von Glaßer explains that his game reviews do not focus on questions

46 Huberts, Christian/Jannot, Eric: *Poor Player*; <https://poorplayerpodcast.de>

47 Hoberg, Nicolas/Kathmann, Jessica/ Strobel, Benjamin: *Behind the Screens*; <http://behind-the-screens.de/category/podcast/>

48 Simond, Stefan Heinrich: *Pixeldiskurs*; <http://pixeldiskurs.de>

49 There is also *Game Studies Audiofied* with a strong focus on science communication putting a spotlight on the life courses and careers of ten game researchers: Inderst, Rudolf: *Game Studies Audiofied*; <https://soundcloud.com/gamestudiesaudiofied>

50 Woelfer, Alice; <https://www.youtube.com/user/AliceWoelfer>

51 Eichler, Christian: *ah ok*; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbRy4RwUaHUSDy4lhHhZIDw>; cf. <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/rush-der-gaming-podcast-detektor-fm/id1316889089?mt=2>

52 Schulze von Glaßer, Michael: *Games and Politics*; <https://www.youtube.com/user/gamesandpolitics/>

regarding graphics and sounds, he rather deep dives into enemy images in military shooters or the absence of cruelty to animals in keeping livestock in farm simulators.⁵³ It remains to be seen whether in the near future there will be a leap forward in regard to German-speaking video game essay creators.⁵⁴ A possible foundation for an expansion is already there: German game influencers are highly popular and reach millions of viewers.⁵⁵ If they decide to change or broaden their programmatic portfolio, this could be the literal ‘game changer’ for the German video game essay, turning displays of impressive gaming and video editing skills in let’s plays into “a bastard genre, the unlawful love (or perhaps more honestly: love/hate) child of academia and the arts.”⁵⁶

CONCLUSION—INSERT COIN AND CONTINUE

The epilogue starts with a semantic trick from the beginning:

“In the past decade video [game] essays have taken on several roles of traditional, written [game] criticism, from advocating for certain [games] or [game]makers and expressing enthusiasm for recent [games] to what counted as ‘long-form’ criticism

53 Cf. <https://www.patreon.com/gamesandpolitics>

54 In 2015 German journalist Patrick Wellinski concluded that there is no German video game essay equivalent to creators such as Kevin Lee oder Tony Zhou. Wellinski surmises that this is based on the language barrier.

55 Every German subscriber-based top-10 let’s player has a viewership over 1,8 million followers. Cf. Behner, Franziska: “YouTube—Top 10 der größten Let’s Player in Deutschland, Oktober 2019,” in: *Play Central*, October 19.10.2019; <https://www.playcentral.de/articles/id37617/1/youtube-top-10-groessten-lets-player-deutschland-oktober-2019.html>

56 Roes, Remco/Pit, Kris: “The Visual Essay and the Place of Artistic Research in the Humanities,” in: *Nature*, October 31, 2017; <https://www.nature.com/articles/41599-017-0004-5>

like discussing genre or the role of sound. There is now an audiovisual take to be found on most (if not all) [ludo]phile topics and buzzwords.”⁵⁷

In summary, this paper argued that video game essays today are a part of media criticism. Broadly translated, the findings indicate that these essays are a heterogeneous expression and manifestation of artistic ambition, journalistic curiosity as well as academic receptiveness. The present findings suggest that video game essayists who provide clips with a higher production value use the mechanisms of crowdfunding platforms as well as revenue income from display, overlay and video ads in order to support their channel. Future research on aesthetic, formal, and rhetorical strategies for communicating in the medium of video might bring new insights in regard to this mode of examining critical and analytical ideas within the discourse field of digital games. In conclusion, video game essay creators—it would appear—have understood that it is not

“any easier to write effectively with video than it is to compose an essay with pen and paper. Similar types of expository and argumentative planning are involved in both forms, while the new technology introduces its own characteristic challenges and choices, including decisions about the spatial and temporal organization and transformation of audiovisual materials, the addition of onscreen text, voiceover commentary, and visual effects.”⁵⁸

Altogether, the field of game studies can profit from these thoughts, concepts, and practices: Certain systemic and technical processes which build the foundation of an audio-visual medium such as video games can be described and examined in a more nuanced way by a sui generis show-do-not-tell approach of video essays. It is also possible to understand video game essays as a powerful tool of science communication: As a format, they have

57 Verdeure, David/Trocan, Irina: “The Best Video Essays of 2018,” in: *Sight & Sound*, January 10, 2020; <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/best-video-essays-2018>

58 Denson, Shane: “The Video Essay: Writing with Video about Film and Media,” *Stanford University*, 2018; <https://art.stanford.edu/courses/2018-2019-filmstud-50q>

a strong force of attraction at their disposal to raise interest in the issues and problems of game research.

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