

(Un)Playful player responses to exclusive video game publishing

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses playful and serious player responses to Remedy Entertainment's announcement to publish their new game *Control*'s PC version exclusively in the Epic Games Store. Through discourse analysis of player tweets, it produces new understanding about player expectations and responses prior to a game's release and how players express their criticism in (un)playful ways. The findings show that through creative use of humour and complaints players retake power from game companies and construct meanings in a way that is only understandable to fellow players. They discursively and morally take an expert stance while underlining the incompetence of the company.

Keywords

player responses, player community, humour, complaints, exclusivity, gaming platforms, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Online player communities are active sites of game discussions. While there is a considerable amount of previous research on game reviews (e.g. Livingston et al. 2011; Zhu and Zhang 2006), little attention has been paid to how players discuss games prior to their release, at a time when the players' opinions about the game are based on promotional material and news about the release schedule and publication. This is a significant gap considering, on one hand, the outrage expressed at controversial announcements and, on the other, the excitement produced by highly anticipated games. Moreover, the ways in which playful discursive practices are mixed with serious meanings in player comments has not received much attention, although it reflects a community in which play is often simultaneously mixed with sincere and serious dedication to the hobby or lifestyle of gaming. This paper examines the discursive practices of players in their responses to news about the publication of Remedy Entertainment's (2019) action adventure video game *Control* exclusively on the Epic Games Store (henceforth referred to as EGS) on PC. The exclusive publication of PC games on distribution service platforms is changing the previously attained tradition of multiplatform game releases by limiting the PC players' freedom of choice on how to play games, as it is not merely enough to have the correct gaming platform – the PC – but also the correct software for purchasing and launching the game.

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The question this study aims to answer is: How do players express criticism about *Control*'s EGS exclusivity for PC in (un)playful ways? This case study produces new understanding to the field of game studies about discursive meaning-making in online player communities in the context of pre-release discussions, and especially around the current, and among players controversial, issue of exclusivity deals. It is an important addition to examining how players communicate their criticism on social media platforms, including discursive power struggles and moral protesting. This, more generally, describes the complex relationship between players, games as products that they may feel entitled to obtain, and game companies as designers and businesses. Although the paper focuses on *Control* as it is beyond the scope of the paper to examine responses to exclusivity deals of other games, the discursive phenomena observed here are likely not limited to this specific context.

In this study, both player responses that can be interpreted as discursively humorous and serious are analysed. In the case of humorous comments, player comments are perceived as a kind of language play in the sense that language is used within a play frame; negative remarks come across as playful sarcasm rather than as aggressive (Boxer and Cortès-Conde 1997). At the same time, however, the target of the remarks is excluded – the playfulness is inclusive only to other readers who agree with the criticism. Humour also renders invisible the fact that power is constantly negotiated and contested in a casual conversation (Eggins and Slade 1995, 167). This is a fruitful perspective to consider, since player criticism appears often linked to the players' powerlessness to influence the decisions of game companies (developers and publishers) that the community perceives as anything from nonsensical to immoral. In the discursive sense, humour and joking allow players to regain some of the lost power as ones who skilfully point out perceived mistakes and injustices. In contrast, serious player comments appear to lack the playfulness of humorous comments, consisting of complaints and blame attributions that are often aggressive in tone. Contrasting these two different discursive types of criticism enables increasing understanding of the complex ways of meaning-making that takes place in player responses and communities, and how the two different approaches – playful and serious – complement each other in the criticism of game companies.

This study examines player tweets left as responses on Remedy Entertainment's (henceforth referred to as RE) official Twitter account. I present a close discourse analysis of carefully selected tweets that demonstrate what is typical about the player responses in the research data. Rather than describe the players' lived experience of interiority, discourse analysis functions here to illustrate the social business that the talk of emotion and judgements in the players' comments accomplishes (McAvoy 2015, 24).

This paper begins with a discussion on previous studies of player-produced game reviews and comments. This is followed by a description of the methods and approaches employed in the paper. The context of RE's tweet that sparked the analysed player responses is then briefly presented, followed by the analysis of player responses in the tweets, and finally a discussion of the results.

PLAYER REVIEWS AND COMMENTS

Player comments on games prior to their release have yet to receive much academic attention. Church and Klein (2013) consider pre-release comments of *Assassin's Creed III* in combination with release and post-release reviews in their investigation of an aesthetic of disappointment, thereby connecting expectations of a game with expressed player experiences of it. Indeed, player reviews of games post-release have been a topic for more investigations. For example, Livingston, Nacke and Mandryk (2011) argue that reading negative game review texts has a significant biasing effect on how players

rate a game and that the authority of the source (whether the criticism came from an expert or a peer) did not influence the effect. Their study shows that player comments and the peer review system of players is consequential and powerful in influencing reader opinions. This is specifically the case with negative comments; there was little to no improvement observed in player experience from reading positive reviews. In line with this, Zhu and Zhang's (2006) analysis of online word-of-mouth reviews shows that ratings significantly influence the sales of video games. These studies do not address whether negative discussions about games prior to their release might also be consequential and influence purchase decisions and future reviews. Pre-release discussions are also likely to represent players with a special commitment to remain informed about the latest and upcoming releases rather than more casual players who may just as easily leave post-release reviews as the so-called hardcore gamers.

Other studies on online player reviews include the lexical analysis-based development of playability heuristics (Zhu and Fang 2015; Zhu et al. 2017), description of the characteristics of player game-review genre (Thominet 2016) and the comparison of player reception of Japanese games in Europe and Japan (Brückner et al. 2018). Player online discussions have also been analysed, for example, to investigate perceptions of all-female esports teams (Siutila and Havaste 2018) and player perspectives on the positive impact of video games, with appreciation for game design emerging as one new category for studying discussions about video games (Bourgonjon et al. 2016). My study adds a new dimension to these previous investigations: critical player discussions on the publishing methods and decisions of a new digital game months prior to its release. Pre-release comments reflect the gaming community's expectations and tell what players anticipate and consider most important before they can play the game themselves. In the responses analysed here, other aspects of the game – its gameplay, narrative, design – are placed in the background, as the decision on how the game is published is foregrounded and highlighted. This suggests that the paratexts and phenomena surrounding a game's release are also influential to players.

Since critical and ridiculing player comments online may be easily connected to trolling, this practice is briefly addressed here. Although trolling may involve the posting of grotesque material (Phillips 2015), it can also consist of messages that appear written by an outwardly sincere person, which are designed to attract predictable responses and provoke futile argument, thereby wasting the respondent's time (Herring et al. 2002). It is in the latter sense that trolling might be visible in some of my data. However, whether a player is trolling appears impossible and even unnecessary to determine. First, very few of the player responses evolve into discussions in which participants are arguing with each other in a futile manner, making such troll posting in this context an unfertile effort. The targets of the criticism, the developers and publishers, also do not partake in such arguments. Second, because the expressed criticism appears mostly reasonable, at least from a PC player's perspective, it is likely that many of the responses are sincerely written, and not only outwardly so. Some responses may be written by players who were never going to buy the game, anyway, giving the comments a partially trolling flair – but even then, this aspect is worth addressing in the analysis only if it is made explicit by the commenter, as such an interpretation cannot be made otherwise. Therefore, rather than trolling, the responses are here perceived as (playful) criticism. Its volume may to some extent be influenced by the desire to partake as a group in criticizing a negatively judged action, but this does not change the quality of the criticism. What remains a useful observation about trolling is that its practices “reveal a great deal about the surrounding cultural terrain”, and what they reveal is often upsetting (Phillips 2015, 10). Even if this study does not deal with trolling per se, the critical player responses reveal much about, for instance, the kinds of business deals that game companies are currently making, how the gaming

community perceives them, and how players partake in the culture as critical customers (whom their critics might in turn describe as entitled).

THE DATA AND METHODS FOR ANALYSING PLAYER RESPONSES

This section discusses the data and research methods employed in this paper. The study is based on a larger data collection (and study in progress) from 64 comment threads on YouTube, Twitter, and the discussion website Reddit between June 2018 and early June 2019, addressing the upcoming publication of RE's *Control*. The responses were collected on two dates in 2019: April 17 (for responses posted since June 2018) and June 4 (for responses posted since April 17), thereby also including likes, retweets and upvotes the responses had accumulated by those specific dates. The data were collected from RE's official accounts on YouTube and Twitter, Reddit communities dedicated to gaming (r/Games, r/Xboxone, r/PS4, r/PCGAMING), and other official gaming Twitter accounts (PlayStation UK, Eurogamer, PC Gamer). Although these discussion platforms are not specifically made for gamers, the threads were likely visited by active and committed players who follow news about game releases and other topical phenomena related to gaming in online spaces. In the initial analysis stage of the study, the comment threads were coded with a qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach to categorize the comments based on what players were saying about *Control* and its pre-release material. This paper conducts a more in-depth analysis through discourse analysis on critical comments about the EGS exclusivity of *Control* for PC that surfaced in the QCA coding frame (Schreier 2012, 57). Therefore, *Control* was not chosen to specifically examine player protests towards exclusivity deals, but these protests emerged as an important phenomenon during the coding process of a more general examination of responses to the game's pre-release material.

This paper focuses on one Twitter comment thread: RE's announcement of *Control*'s release date on March 27, 2019 (collected on April 17). The announcement marks a change in the content and type of player responses from those mostly expressing intrigue and anticipation to criticism and complaints. Moreover, the unfortunate wording of the tweet enables and inspires players' humorous responses in a way in which other RE's announcements in the data do not (although specific tweets by PlayStation UK and PC Gamer do). The context of the tweet and its responses are described in the next section. The number of tweets in the thread is relatively small (59), but they represent what is typical about player responses also in the larger data set. To illustrate this, a few excerpts are also shared from elsewhere in the data, although due to space limitations, they are not accompanied here with the same level of discourse analysis as the ones from the Twitter thread in focus.

With a multi-perspective discourse analysis of the thread's comments, the study critically interprets how (playful) criticism is constructed discursively in the player responses. In this way, it analyses how the players' language contributes to the construction of social reality (Schreier 2012, 46) in the context of gaming and game releases. As tweets are limited to 280 characters, players have limited space to express their responses and reactions; despite their shortness, however, they can include complex and multilayered discursive meanings and identity management. For this reason, the discourse analysis draws on different, yet closely related approaches on evaluative language and complaints (Bergmann 1998; Drew 1998; Martin and White 2005; Turowetz and Maynard 2010), stancetaking (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009), and casual conversation (Egins and Slade 1997).

Additionally, the study draws on insights on joking, especially as something that linguistically includes and excludes participants. This is done to examine, for example, how power relations are negotiated in the player comments through humorous

comments. Purdie's (1993, 5) model understands joking as the "dynamic constitution of two discursive relationships" in which jokers "form an excluding relationship with their object" and collusively form a relationship between the joke's teller and its audience that depends upon the object's exclusion. In the exclusion, the target of the joke is the Butt who is degraded from a perceived position of power. The Butt of the joke is denied discursive potency, "their own subjectivity as language-makers" (Purdie 1993, 59). In this research data, the game companies involved are constructed as discursively incompetent and are uninvited to language play, while the joking constructs the joke teller(s) and the audience as subjectively valid.

Using the tools of discourse analysis, I have identified comments as playful for including humour and joking, and as serious for including non-humorous complaints and aggressive language. The tweets that I include here to demonstrate typical features of player responses are presented as text quotes instead of as screenshots to protect the identity of the commenters and to avoid infringing Twitter copyrights. This does not fully anonymize the players, since it is possible to use online search engines to locate the tweets. This is an unavoidable risk, because for discourse analysis, it is necessary to present the actual quotes from the material instead of paraphrasing them. Although the tweets have been publicly posted online, it is unlikely that the commenters expected to have their tweets analysed by a researcher, which is why I have decided not to disclose their identities explicitly.

RESPONSES TO REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT'S TWEET

This section first discusses RE's tweet and the context that appeared to make it controversial to players and then continues with an analysis of player responses to it. In their announcement tweet for *Control*'s release date in March 2019, RE uses the phrasing "Get @ControlRemedy on your platform of choice". The tweet reads as follows:

August 27th, 2019. Get @ControlRemedy on your platform of choice. #EntertheOldestHouse

Preorder #ControlRemedy now at controlgame.com

Watch the gameplay trailer: [link]

[an image of the game]

The tweet itself does not mention details of the available platforms, but its wording suggests that all technically possible options are available – currently, this usually means Xbox One, PlayStation 4 (PS4), the PC, and sometimes Nintendo Switch (although not for *Control*). Video game consoles constitute a two-sided market that is "characterized by intense inter- and intra-generation competition" (Zhu and Zhang 2006, 369): to players, the number of available game titles for a console is key, while game publishers require suitable platforms for their products. For more than a decade, releasing a game instantaneously on different platforms has been the norm for many game studios, as mandated by publishers (Zhu and Zhang 2006, 369).

In line with this, *Control* is available for three gaming platforms, but on the PC, for the first year of its release the game is exclusively available on the relatively new EGS, a storefront and launcher developed and released by Epic Games video game company in December 2018. It has received criticism in online player communities for being unfinished and insecure, and players who mainly use the PC for gaming are also frustrated about having to install new software to buy and launch specific games. These complaints are also reflected in my data. Therefore, even if *Control* was announced as available on the PC *gaming platform*, it was not announced as available on a

distribution service platform that the players in these comments prefer. Steam, developed by Valve Corporation, is the most popular one of these latter types of platforms, although there has been an increase in the number of distribution service platforms (e.g. Rockstar Games PC Launcher in 2019, Uplay by Ubisoft in 2012, Origin by Electronic Arts in 2011), and EGS is thus only one example of an emerging phenomenon in which game companies attempt to have more control especially over their profit share. The increase of platforms is not perceived as an increase of options by players, as games are exclusively published on certain services.

In the larger data set, EGS exclusivity was not the only platform-related pre-release announcement that caused criticism. It also turned out that the PS4 version of the game came with more pre-order perks than the Xbox One version despite the same price. This is also briefly addressed in the analysis below. It suggests that despite the multi-platform release of games, competition between the platform continues to be a topical issue that causes players to criticize company decisions.

Players' platform of choice

Many players quote and paraphrase RE's wording "platform of choice" in their responses to ridicule it, to challenge its truthfulness, to judge it, and to take an opposing stance. Thus, despite their shortness, their tweet responses are packed with meaning. A good example of this is presented in Excerpt 1, the most popular tweet in the thread (with the highest number of 'likes', 31 at the time of data collection), stating only:

Ex. 1: Platform of my choice is @steam_games

The player paraphrases RE's opening tweet in such a way that the meaning is changed to express the player's personal choice. Without contextual information, the tweet does not appear oppositional; it is the knowledge of Steam's unavailability as an option that enables an interpretation of the tweet as critical. Paraphrasing RE's tweet positions the textual voice at odds with it and achieves the same contrary position as responses in which the disagreement is explicitly stated. The paraphrasing invokes the position expressed in RE's tweet only to reject it, that is, to disclaim it (Martin and White 118). It is also a direct criticism in the sense that the paraphrasing leaves no question of who the blamed party is. Paraphrasing here also functions as a kind of sarcastic mimicry, producing a ridiculing tone. At the same time, the player's expression of "my choice" makes the criticism personal; the publishing decision is something that they personally judge. Despite the tweet's shortness, it therefore includes rather complex language play that manages to ridicule and criticize the wording in RE's tweet and their game publishing decision in a way that is only understandable for those with the contextual knowledge of the situation. These responses being directly posted on RE's official Twitter account suggests that the players wish them to hear their criticism. The tweets have a humorous tone to players who agree with the criticism, but less so for the 'othered' Butt of the joke.

The humour is partially produced by the sense of comic surprise, which "stems from the occurrence of unforeseen and unforeseeable events" that are not pre-signalled or follow a pre-established system of logic (Krutnik and Neale 1990, 41-42). That is, although one clicking to see the responses might already expect to see criticism, the simply efficient and playful linguistic way in which it is achieved comes as a surprise. The unexpected use of extreme case formulations such as 'all', 'never', 'completely' (Turowetz and Maynard 2010, 514) appears also capable of producing such comic surprise. This can be seen in the following tweet (Ex.2):

Ex. 2: What do you mean platform of choice? There is no PC version.

Here the denial of the existence of a PC version takes the criticism of the EGS to the extreme by ignoring it entirely as a valid option (“There is *no* PC version”). That is, it cannot be considered by this player as a purchase option to the extent that they suggest it does not exist. While the tweet is critical in tone, it is also constructed like a joke. The outwardly sincere question at the beginning of the tweet sets up the joke that is completed by the surprising denial of a PC version even existing. Elsewhere in the data, a similar joke is constructed in comments that ignore the game’s release date and treat its delayed release on Steam as the actual publication date. For example, a YouTube comment from March 26, 2019 states: “A year and a half to wait, such a tease [crying emoji]”. Again, these jokes, as well as the criticism, only become understandable to those who are already in-the-know.

The critical comments therefore come also as a surprise to those who do not yet know what inspired the responses. In these cases, the sarcastic or otherwise humorous tone is invisible to the reader. The challenge of conveying language play, such as irony and metaphor, on Twitter has been noted by Veale (2017, 74). The microtexts of the medium ought to encompass both the writer’s meaning and attitude to this meaning, and the audience may struggle to perceive them “in the playful (mis)match of a linguistic container” (the tweet) “to its contents”. To overcome this challenge in conveying meaning and attitude, some players employ the use of gifs, animated images, to visually (and verbally when the gifs include subtitles) let the reader know about the playfulness of their discursive practice.

This is demonstrated by a tweet that quotes “Platform of choice”, followed by ellipsis and a gif of the character Joker in *The Dark Knight* Batman movie, with the subtitle “Very poor choice of words”. Although the combination of the quote and ellipsis already playfully suggests a piece of criticism left unsaid and positions the quoted material as the topic of ridicule, it is the gif that clarifies the meaning of the tweet unmistakably. Unlike the previous tweet, this one lacks the implication of a personal offence taking place. Instead, it seems the player is making a ridiculing observation of the tweet’s wording. RE again becomes the Butt of their joke and the player’s belonging to the critical player community becomes evident, but the tweet does not suggest any kind of personal investment from the player. The choice to use a gif of the famously chaos-creating criminal character of the Joker, about to let Batman’s love interest fall off a high building, may not be only based on the very fitting subtitles that explicitly criticize the wording. It also produces a simultaneously threatening and playful atmosphere, as the Joker is a menacing character who will flippantly commit murder with a smile on his face. His character is a fitting choice for representing criticism by players who appear to wish their message to be heard, but mix their criticism with humour, as this allows them to discursively strip power away from game companies and to hedge threatening language in these criticisms.

The power struggle is especially manifested in the ridiculing of RE’s choice of words, as it marks a failure in communication. This makes the company appear discursively incompetent. In contrast, in the discursive sense, jokers “constitute themselves as ‘proper speakers’ and so as the properly powerful” (Purdie 1993, 129). By underlining, in their opinion, the failure of RE to convey correct information in their official tweet, and their own correctness and cleverness through language play, the players portray the company as incompetent not only in their past actions, but also to respond to their criticism credibly. To deliberately laugh at someone is “always an articulation of contempt” which implies “superiority mixed with hostility”; the Butt of the joke, the opponent, is not recognized as an equal worthy of fighting (Purdie 1993, 60). It is a declaration that denies power from the Butt of the joke; power that the Butt seemingly had over the teller of the joke. The players may not wield concrete power to change the

publishing decisions of game companies, but they can express their unwillingness to submit in public discourse and attempt to influence anyone reading the responses.

The dimensions of serious player complaints

Blame and moral discourse have been implicitly present in the data excerpts above but are also more explicitly visible in the player responses. In a generalized mode, “whenever respect and approval (or disrespect and disapproval) for an individual are communicated, a moral discourse takes place (regardless of the feelings and thoughts of the participants)” (Bergmann 1998, 286). Allocations of blame in complaints are some of the most explicit ways of partaking in moral discourse. In contrast to the responses discussed above, these complaints appear less playful and humorous, as they focus on pointing out the perceived moral, personal, and even cultural offences in the decision to publish *Control* exclusively on the EGS. Consequently, these tweets are, first, more explicit about the reasons for their criticism, and, second, render more visible the perceived emotional response of the players. Excerpt 3 is an example of both these aspects:

Ex. 3: I can't get @ControlRemedy on my platform of choice because you signed a rotten exclusivity deal with Epic.

In addition to the paraphrasing and personalization (“my platform of choice”) practices that have been discussed above, in this tweet the player highlights the exclusivity deal with the EGS as the reason why the player “can’t” get the game on their platform of choice. The tweet is clearly addressed to RE, regardless of whether it was RE or *Control*’s publisher 505 Games that pushed for the decision. The description of the deal as “rotten” produces an especially strong negative judgement. This tweet shows that when speakers “are complaining about the conduct of others ... they may be quite explicit about the ways in which that conduct or treatment is at fault and to be blamed” (Drew 1998, 302-303). Interestingly, the player’s choice to use “can’t” instead of “won’t” gives the tweet a narrative tone that suggests that the player might have otherwise been able to purchase the game (and support the game and the developers), but because of the ‘villainous’ actions of RE, they cannot do that. The exclusivity deal is portrayed as so morally wrong that it takes away the player’s ability to buy the game, even if it is available on many different platforms, and, indeed, on the EGS. Therefore, the player is discursively portrayed as a wronged hero who is morally prevented from supporting a company that has been revealed as villainous – and instead now challenges their actions by addressing them critically on a public social platform. This is in line with how “personal stance is always achieved through comparison and contrast with other relevant persons” (Jaffe 2009, 9); the player contrasts themselves with the ‘offender’ by pointing out their misconduct.

Not all complaints, however, clearly mention the reasons for criticism, but go into detail in the description of personal offences that have taken place, thereby conveying a negative affective stance. This manifests in the following tweet (Ex. 4):

Ex. 4: Nice to see Remedy treating their fanbase like garbage. Really glad to see. I've always supported Remedy, bought the Limited Edition of Alan Wake, bought Quantum Break day one, I was planning to pre order Control... But I won't. Not when I'm treated like this.

The player does not explain what RE has done wrong – perhaps unsurprisingly, this tweet receives the confused response “Dafuq have they done to you?” from another player. The tweet begins with a harsh condemnation and allocation of blame to RE, evident in the sarcastic tone (“nice to see”) and the description of their way of treating fans “like garbage”. Here the sarcasm in saying the opposite of what one means

becomes easily detectable because of the immediate switch to a sincere complaint. Their action is also “described in such a way that the fault is not to be regarded as accidental, inadvertent, or otherwise innocent” (Drew 1998, 316); they are to be fully blamed for their deliberate behaviour (Turowetz and Maynard 2010, 511). It is described as something that affects all their fans, rather than merely ones not willing to buy the game on EGS. The player is therefore generalizing their personal experience – the offence appears greater when it affects more than one person, and the player positions themselves as a part of a whole rather than a lone complainer. The sarcasm is continued in the comment “Really glad to see”, but after this, the player turns to describing their personal history as a fan. To emphasize their message, they use an extreme case formulation (“I’ve *always* supported Remedy”) and list their previous purchases of RE’s games. This functions to demonstrate the player’s previous investment as a fan, and thereby their importance to RE as a loyal customer. The player also takes the stance of an expert as someone who is very familiar with their games. In this way, the player discursively constructs a meaning that their complaint ought to be noted and taken seriously by RE. The ending of the tweet suggests that the loyalty has now been lost, and that the player appears to experience the criticized publishing of *Control* very personally: “Not when *I’m* treated like this”. As the response the player received above shows, however, such a personally loaded criticism may produce confused comments from those who do not share the experience or find such a strong reaction to the news of a game’s publication strange.

Unlike the tweets discussed above, this one also addresses RE by name. In casual talk, names and vocatives can be used as a means of “attempting to control, manipulate, divide or align the other interactants” (Eggins and Slade 1995, 144). Here, mentioning “Remedy” by name marks them as the opponent and functions to call them out publicly and personally in a situation in which it would be challenging for RE to defend themselves. This is because in this situation, they have been presented as discursively incompetent in player responses and further interaction might only cause more harm. The player can therefore boldly name them without fearing repercussions and participate in discursively stripping RE of power in this context.

Elsewhere in the data, EGS is portrayed as the enemy instead of RE. For example, YouTube commenter from April 18 states that “I refuse to be strong-armed by an anti-consumer corporation”. This quote exemplifies the kind of language used in the criticism that makes a power struggle explicit, while underlining EGS as a powerful company that does not prioritize its customers’ interests and rights. “Anti-consumer”, however, becomes a term that is used repeatedly not only in the context of EGS, but also in the complaints of Xbox One players about a deal with Sony that resulted in a greater number of pre-order perks for the PS4 release of the game. A response left to news about the perks on @ControlRemedy’s Twitter account on May 2 explains why this is condemnable: “Here, though, you’re paying the same price, but you’re getting less. You’re treated as a 2nd class customer.” The tweet points out the injustice in receiving less for the same price on different gaming platforms and gives the comment a political flair with the expression of ‘second class’, as it suggests that some customers are more privileged than others.

A final aspect about the complaints expressed about the publishing of *Control* on EGS concerns a cultural dimension. In the following tweet, the commenter is from Eastern Europe and explains why not publishing the game on Steam is a careless decision:

Ex. 5: In Eastern Europe it is extremely high level of piracy, and only thing that solved this problem was Steam. Without it’s support, the main game service for any single game here will be torrent tracker.

Again, this tweet already assumes that the readers know about the exclusivity deal with EGS, as it jumps straight to explaining the value of the more popular platform Steam in the region. It is discursively striking that it neither employs humour nor uses harsh descriptions (such as “rotten” or “garbage”) in its criticism, although the player uses extreme case formulations (in “extremely high” and “only thing”) to convey an epistemic stance of being certain about their proposition. The tone of the tweet is rather matter-of-fact – showing that moral evaluations can also be neutralized by speaking about the issue in a polite manner (Bergmann 1998, 288). However, despite the discursively rather polite tone, the tweet contains a threat of piracy which the player describes as unavoidable with the use of the extreme case formulations. This player is not the only one to bring up the option of piracy in the comments, but interestingly highlights it as a regional issue. Whether or not Steam is truly the only option against piracy in Eastern Europe, the player’s response suggests that game publishing decisions can also have regional consequences that developers and publishers may fail to note in advance. This is in line with observations of elsewhere in the research data of players, for example, complaining about the EGS’s pricing for *Control* as unreasonable or unrealistic in the context of Eastern Europe where average wages are lower than in the West. Therefore, it underlines concrete economic issues in the global publication of games.

DISCUSSION

Through multi-perspective discourse analysis of player tweets, this paper examined how players express their criticism in (non)playful ways about the publication decisions of RE’s new digital game *Control*. The results show that playful sarcasm and blame attributing complaints are used by players to ridicule them and to portray the game company as discursively incompetent and as the villains in this scenario. By addressing the company directly on their official Twitter account but simultaneously joking about their discursive incompetence, the tweets suggest that players want the company to hear their criticism, but not respond to it. That is, the players are positioned as superior experts of language play whose ridicule takes away RE’s discursive power and opportunity to defend themselves. Additionally, in their criticism, players take epistemic stances that convey certainty in their judgements (rather than leaving room for disagreement), and negative affective stances which suggest that they perceive the decisions as personally offensive. In these ways, players on one hand construct a sense of a unified understanding of what is and is not acceptable (regardless of whether such a unified understanding truly exists), excluding the offending party and those who might disagree. On the other hand, the affective responses underline the personal importance of gaming and decisions made by game companies to players long before a game is released, even when the game is a new intellectual property like *Control* instead of a long-awaited sequel to a popular game series. Combined, the humorous and serious responses convey the message that a game company’s disappointing decision is unforgivable, although it is possible that some of these players end up purchasing and playing the game, nevertheless. What this study addresses are the meanings they produce in their responses; what they do after falls beyond the scope of this study.

As discussed above, players do not wield concrete power to change the various decisions that are involved in game design and publishing. However, considering the influence of negative peer-produced game reviews on sales that has been well-established in previous research (Livingston et al. 2011; Zhu and Zhang 2006), it follows that negative pre-release discussions might also be consequential not only discursively, but also economically. This is especially the case for smaller studios (unlike RE) whose games do not receive the same level of promotion as those of bigger studios and rely strongly on player peer reviews. While this dimension is not studied here, it links discursive power negotiations to tangible uses of power and underlines

the importance of studying the discursive practices taking place in player discussions in the attempt to understand gaming communities.

The player tweets, like other discursive material, engage in social business and the construction of social reality. A manifestation of this is how much of the criticism is invisible to those who do not belong to the (PC) player community and speak its language. An interesting concept to consider based on the findings and the power negotiations in the tweets is anti-language (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock 2017). It is a “productive linguistic tool deployed strategically” by an emerging speech community “to establish and maintain counter-realities, express opposition to mainstream practices and values, and demonstrate social resistance” (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock 2017, 348). Although often observed in marginalized groups with precarious or liminal standing in society, I suggest it may also take place in groups that perceive their standing as liminal whether this perception is justified or not. This is the case with individuals whose personal fears lead them to believe that their status in society is threatened. Here, gamers experience a lack of power in the face of game developers and publishers and perceive this as an experience of a precarious status, even though it only affects their free-time activity and not their daily experienced life in society. Anti-languages are creative semiotic systems that “set subcultures apart from (or in opposition to) mainstream discourse communities” (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock 2017, 349), and, like joking, have the function of excluding ‘others’ while strengthening group solidarity for those who are in on the joke or resistance. Their anti-language may be completely incomprehensible to outsiders. This is the case with player responses in my data: an outsider – someone who does not play games and read online game discussions – cannot understand why the criticism is taking place or how criticism is formed in them. Therefore, anti-language is a potentially fruitful perspective also for future research on player communities and their language.

Even if the language is understood, players are not always successful in conveying the humorous meaning in their comments and moving the readers to laughter. This can happen when the audience notes the social transgression of the utterance but will only feel funniness if the transgression is produced in one’s mind as “momentarily ‘permitted’” (Purdie 1993, 13). This explains why, for example, fans of RE or those with an existing distaste for the player community’s critical nature might be able to recognize that the responses are attempting to be playfully sarcastic, but do not ‘permit’ the discursive attacks and therefore do not find them funny. This layer of joking could be studied further in future studies that also place focus on how players respond to each other’s messages; when jokes are successful or not, and what kinds of discursive practices players use to convey their evaluations of the jokes.

Strikingly, the comments analysed here appear to have very little to do with the game itself, and instead concern the way in which the game is promoted and published. From this perspective, it is challenging to evaluate how much the players who responded to this Twitter thread even knew about *Control* before learning about its publishing method that was controversial to them. In other conversation threads in the data, there is both intrigue and criticism expressed towards various aspects of the game: for example, how the gameplay mechanics, graphics, narrative and character design look. Future research could focus more on how the context of the news posting influences what types of player responses it produces.

The findings of this study are useful to those interested in examining player communities as critical, and how meanings are constructed in their discussions. The study specifically increases understanding about the complex and varied ways in which players convey their criticism; the tweets discussed here are both playful and serious but lack the severe aggression and harassment that player communities are often known

for in the media and which have received academic attention. This calls for a nuanced perception of the discursive practices of player communities and their role in constructing the social reality of gaming. In addition to benefitting the field of game studies, game developers, publishers and promoters may use the findings of this study to evaluate their means of communicating with players and to understand their critical perspective.

CONCLUSION

Players creatively and playfully use the discursive tools of humour and complaints in their pre-release criticism of the game's exclusive publishing decision. In this criticism, they do not address the game's qualities, but only the way in which it is being published, suggesting there are some actions that players condemn regardless of what the game is like. Player comments are revealed as sites of discursive power negotiations in which powerful companies are the ones excluded and ridiculed, and players are the experts linguistically and, through their critical evaluations and personal stances, morally. Because of this complex social business that player comments engage in, it is of continued importance to examine how meaning-making is constructed in different contexts of games and play.

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