Game Reviews as Tools in the Construction of Game Historical Awareness in Finland, 1984–2010: Case *MikroBitti* Magazine

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces a case study on game journalistic practices and on the construction of historical self-understanding of game cultures. It presents results of the study of Finnish digital game reviews, retrieved from a major computer hobbyist magazine, *MikroBitti*. The results are based on a qualitative content analysis of 640 reviews from two magazine issues per year (1984–2010). The aim is to examine changes in the production of game reviews, in the work of individual reviewers, and then to focus on particular stylistic characteristics: to study how game journalists refer, on the one hand to other popular media cultural forms and products such as television series, cinema, comics, literature, sports, news, board games, and on the other hand, to other digital games, game genres, genre-hybrids, game producers, national game product styles as well as game designer auteurs. The paper argues that by using these references and allusions game journalists construct historical understanding of digital gaming as a particular popular media cultural form. The preliminary research hypothesis was that digital game cultural references increase and other media cultural references decline in reviews. This has proven to be partially incorrect. The content analysis of reviews hints that historical self-understanding of game cultural actors as well as the press and gaming industry has grown and been enriched since the 1980s.

Keywords

Game journalism, game criticism, game reviews, cultural history of digital gaming, Finland

INTRODUCTION

> If you don't know, why old gamers cry for adventure games of the 1990s, Sam & Max Season 1 reveals the reason. The game is like straight from the Golden Ages of LucasArts. (Tapio Berschewsky: *Sam & Max Season 1* review, *MikroBitti* (*MB*) 12/2007)

Digital gaming has become more diverse in the last three decades. New gaming environments and game genres have emerged in interaction with changes in user groups as well as in industry and public attitude towards digital culture. Changed public attitude can be seen for example in game reviews which are no longer published only in specialist home computer and recreational software related magazines, but also in the newspapers,

general magazines, television and the Internet. Game reviews like other reviews are often published as short "matchbox critiques" (Saarenmaa 2009, 88) in non-specialists media. At the same time, the number and the variety of solely (digital) game oriented publications has increased. The aim of the paper[1] is to shed light on to the changing and evolving processes of game journalism, focusing particularly on digital game reviews[2] in the Finnish context[3]. The game reviews and critiques are essential sections of game journalism. However, one should also notice other forms of game journalism, including the more critical analyses of game cultures and industry, discussed, for example, by José P. Zagal and his colleagues (2009, see also Thomas et al 2009). Game cultures and game journalism have obviously many national or area related special features and similarities, but still, before essential comparative future studies of these issues can be undertaken, I will focus on game journalism from the Finnish perspective.

Finnish game journalism emerged in special IT magazines as well as in fanzine magazines in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. At first, these magazines started to release recreational software code listings for hobbyist use. (Saarikoski 2004; Saarikoski & Suominen 2009.)[4]   Also a popular magazine for technology, *Tekniikan Maailma* (The World of Technology) followed regularly developments in electronic entertainment technologies from the 1970s onwards (Suominen 1999). A Finnish pioneer of game reviews of commercial games was *MikroBitti* magazine by Tecnopress, which was introduced in 1984. Its biggest early rival, *Printti* by A-Lehdet (1984–1987) largely bypassed games and focused on other aspects of home and recreational computing. This reveals bipolarity in computer use. On some level, (home) computing was divided into more or less daunting gaming for leisure, and on the other, it welcomed and respected serious use such as programming, word processing and spreadsheeting.

MikroBitti and its spin offs, *C=lehti* (for Commodore users), *Tietokonepelien vuosikirja* (The Yearbook of Computer Games), *Pelit* and *Peliasema* acted as bellwethers in Finnish game journalism. They published stories about first subcultural game journalistic (male) "auteurs" and more ordinary writers, who were in the first place very young and in most cases without much previous journalistic experience or education.

It appears that, particularly in the first years of the 1980s, these assistant reporters wrote reviews on the basis of their own likings, but very quickly the magazine and its editor-in-chief started to develop the magazine in order to meet the needs of an expanding readership (A memo by the editor-in-chief Markku Alanen, Autumn 1988). The change of *MikroBitti*'s policy was affected by market studies and direct reader feedback (in letters for the editor for example). The magazine also noticed the readers' major interest in gaming (Saarikoski 2004, 244).

Writers of game reviews constructed a game cultural identity and cultural historical awareness when they referred to previous games, game genres, game designers and publishers as well as to other popular media cultural forms and products such as cinema, comics, literature, sports or TV series[5]. Therefore, popular media culture was the context where the new cultural practice, namely gaming, was mostly linked. With this network of references, reviewers built game cultural communality, the shared area of makers of games, game media, readers and players – and history of digital gaming.

Then and now, the audience assesses a new game in relation to former games, gaming practices, other interests and shared knowledge. Reviewers explain and make games more understandable for readers when they use references, but at the same time, readers give

significance to games with their perceived common features while they play games, search information on them or discuss games with other people. In this paper, I examine the ways in which reviewers construct game historical understanding in game reviews. What kinds of elements formed game historical awareness and how it has changed? How has the historical awareness been constructed, on the one hand, in relation to digital gaming, and on the other hand, in relation to other popular media cultural forms?

The topic is relevant in many ways. Game reviews form an important element in game journalism, and although there is a plethora of studies about games in larger cultural and social context, there are fewer studies regarding game journalism (some however, such as Saarikoski 2004; Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009; Zagal, Ladd & Johnson 2009). Scholars have utilized (online) game reviews as source material in studies of particular games and gaming practices, but they have not studied game reviews themselves as an individual art form or form of media critique (see e. g. Ivory 2006; Joeckel 2007; King 2007). Moreover, media critiques, for example, have usually been studied from the perspectives of reception and the professional development of the genre, but game reviews have not been subjected to this type of investigation (see e. g. Kivimäki 2001; Lehtisalo 2009; Laine 2009). I argue that just same like journalistic cinema and television critiques ought to be objects and sources of audiovisual media culture (Lehtisalo 2009, 4), studies of game critique should be a natural part of digital cultural research. Also, published game reviews have an important combinatory role between game production, products and consumers, even today, when the situation is partially different due to users driven discussion forums on the Internet.

There ought to be research on game criticism also because of its special nature. Game criticism differs from other above mentioned types of criticism. In terms of comparison one would argue that it has certain similarities with genre specific fanzine journalism consisting of, for example, reviews of science fiction (Hirsjärvi 2009, 158–169) as well as evaluations of the other new media products. Still, the certain general and historical under estimation has an effect on the development of game journalism and game criticism which, according to Veijo Hietala (2009), is also behind immaturity of television criticism.

A particular feature of this paper is that game criticism is approached within a history cultural framework. The concepts of *history production* and the *cultures of history* form theoretical background of the paper. Cultures of history refer to particular contemporary cultural practices, which are related to forms, habits, events and meanings of meeting with the past. Moreover, it consists of practices of maintaining relations with the past in museums, schools, archives, monuments and exhibitions.[6] Swedish professor of cultures of history Peter Aronsson defines cultures of history (historiekultur) as sources, artefacts, habits, rituals and references of history, which provide particular possibilities to create linkages between the past, present and future. The specific linkage becomes visible as uses of history or production of history (historiebruk). It is a process for signification and legitimation, where parts of cultures of history are activated and formed as practical entities. Historical awareness (historiemetvetande) means conceptions of connections between the past, present and future. These connections are directed, established as well as renewed with production of history. Aronsson argues that, in some sense, cultures of history, are staged with uses of history. This is how historical awareness will be formed. (Aronsson 2005.)

In the context of digital gaming, game reviews in particular are these tools with which history is produced, and game magazines and other publications are stages which help to establish and reform historical awareness. Game reviewers have been able to actively define the importance of certain specific game products and their relationship with earlier games and game cultural practices: "In its previous Quest for Glory games, Sierra mixed graphical adventure to full blooded skeleton of role playing game. Parts I and II were an important part of the history of role playing games." (Jukka O. Kauppinen: Quest for Glory 3. Wages of War review, *MB* 12/1992, 59.)

In the previous citation, history discourse is visible and wells from reviewing of sequel for a well-recognized game classic. History discourse can also be more discreet and implicit like many following examples will show.

RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODS

Game reviews published in the *MikroBitti* magazine 1984–2010 will be used as a primary source of this study. Although *MikroBitti* is not focused only on games and its comparative importance as game media has decreased in the last ten years owing to the increase in other media forms and publications, it provides a long and coherent time frame for the study. *MikroBitti* has also been one of the most circulated and widely read home computing publication in Finland, although one has to take changes in editorial policy about game related issues into account as well. The magazine's circulation reached 40,000 copies almost immediately, but hit some sort of a trough in the early 1990s due to economic depression and to the launch of spin-off publications. The competition from Commodore oriented *C=lehti* and its follower *Pelit* (Games) reduced the number of *Mikrobitti* subscribers.

After the depression, *MikroBitti*'s popularity increased rapidly, and in the early 2000s, the magazine's circulation topped at over 100,000 copies. In the last few years, the circulation has decreased again after *Mikrobitti* merged with *Hifi* magazine of the same publisher and when the magazine's editorial policy changed. It is now a more general publication for home electronics. The changes among readers and editorial policy will not be studied.

1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
44780	43282	41641	39346	37748	38841	40282	36524

1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2009
33435	56691	71014	81898	86688	100127	102970	93364	88308

Table 1. Circulation of *MikroBitti* 1984–2009. Source: Levikintarkastus Oy and media cards of the magazines.

I have chosen two magazine issues of every publication year for closer examination. The first issue usually runs from December and the second from late spring. I have analyzed all game reviews of the issues with some exceptions[7]. Even though the research corpus is only a sample, it is still representative. During the analysis, research findings were largely saturated already after study of only few years' issues. However, the close examination of the whole time span of 25 years was important and interesting, because this analysis revealed changes and evolving processes in games, game genres, game journalists style as well as the emergence of some sort of a recollection culture about digital games. The extensive research material gives also opportunities for further studies.

The primary research material has been analyzed with induction based qualitative content analysis methods (Pietilä 1976; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002; Seppänen 2005). A preliminary research hypothesis has directed the study, but observations of game reviews and major interpretations about them have emerged during the research project. The preliminary hypothesis was about game cultures becoming independent and matured: I assumed, for instance, that there will be more references to other popular cultural forms and less references to other games in early game reviews, when digital gaming has not yet gained an established position as an individual form of popular culture. The hypothesis proved to be partially incorrect.

After the selection of particular magazine issues, the individual game reviews were tabulated. Recording of analysis units occurred partially in a non-chronological way. I started tabulating the issues of the mid 1990s, not from the first year of publication which was 1984. This was a conscious decision, because chronological progress might have been directed to "enriching" of interpretative framework towards contemporary issues at the same time when understanding about the research material had increased. Therefore, the development of game reviews might have seemed to be too linear.

The research table consists of data of issue numbers and page numbers; titles of reviewed games; names of the writers; references to other games and game cultural phenomena; references to other media forms as well as other preliminary research observations. There are direct citations from the reviews or, in some cases, paraphrases of them.[8] The research sample consists in total of 640 game reviews from 78 different writers.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS
In the results chapter I will focus first on general changes in game reviews. How have reviewing criteria varied? How have the length and graphical settings of reviews changed? What kinds of unique features and styles have different reviewers used? The description of authors and external features of reviews (such as graphical design, measuring scales, technical references) is essential, because it contextualizes the phenomenon (reviewing in game cultures) and its changes. It explains the practices of actors behind discourses. It is also important, because it reveals the maturing processes and learning trajectory of writers and the magazine in general. Hence, changes in writing styles and visual representations of reviews articulate construction of historical understanding from the individual perspective and institutional perspective as well as deepening the connection between game journalism and general journalistic practices.

After presenting general characteristics of reviews, I will focus on analysis of game cultural as well as popular cultural references in reviews. I will study only some of the possible features. José P. Zagal, Amanda Ladd and Terris Johnson (2009) who have studied online game reviews, have defined nine themes of reviews: description; own

gaming experiences; advises for readers; design proposals; creating of media context; creating of game context; technology; design hypotheses and gaming industry. From these themes, I focus mostly on descriptions, personal gaming experiences, media and game contexts and industry.

Changes in Reviews

> Personally I really don't like these kinds of games, but the Real Masters Fan might crush my skull and get excited about this product. It probably beats a dollhouse. Hopefully He-Man will be succeeded and gets Barbie and half of the kingdom." (Niko Nirvi: *Masters of the Universe* review, *MB* 5/1987)

Changes in reviews are related acts of reviewers and changes in gaming industry and game magazines. In addition, they reflect transformations of general public attitude towards digital game cultures. Importance of reviews and their length have varied in *MikroBitti* from the 1980s to the present. After the initial years, the reviews became more detailed and varied, but the situation changed after new publications which focused only on digital games came to the market in the early 1990s. The next big change in editorial policy occurred in 2004–2006 when *MikroBitti* transferred from home computer magazine to a more general home electronics magazine. After that, game reviews have competed even more with other contents.

MikroBitti's game reviews were very short and non-analytical in 1984–1985. The magazine published game reviews on a number of home computer platforms, and there was a large amount of writers. This situation came about due to the complicated home computer market circumstances as well as to the lack of skillful assistant reviewers. The reviewers discussed, for example, questions of game *clones* due to the fact that many published games were more or less direct copies of *Pac-Man* (1980) or other popular arcade games. In addition, some reviewers gave concrete hints on how to tune the television picture so that it would be ideal for gaming (Seppo Tossavainen: *Minigolf* game review, *MB* 4/1984). I would argue that internal gaming historical references were rarer than later on, even though they partially dealt with the clone debate. One can notice a similar comparative emphasis on early movie reviews in the early 20th century: reviews focused on describing elements of technological attractions and their user experience (cmp. Kivimäki 2001, 295–296).

Niko Nirvi's start as the editorial assistant of *MikroBitti* was a turning point in Finnish game journalism in 1986 (see also Saarikoski 2004, 246; Saarikoski & Suominen 2009).[9] Reviews became more extensive, and Nirvi cultivated humor and used more references to other game cultural products, forms and other fields of popular culture than any other Finnish game reviewer at the time. Nirvi's enthusiasm and devotion was something exceptional and resembled those of cinema aficionado. His wide ranging and experienced way of writing brings to mind what Kieron Gillen (2004) has called *New Game Journalism*. Niko Nirvi put his soul into his writings and described his own playing experiences as well in a very lively way. Nirvi's start was a turning point not only from the game journalistic perspective, but also from the history cultural viewpoint. He introduced the more historical oriented review style when defining some games as being "historical", "classics" or when writing about their predecessors and production contexts. This sort of historical writing, which later on began increasingly to resemble recollection discourse, has been an integral part of Finnish game journalism ever since.

It appears that Nirvi's style worked as an example for many other game reviewers, whose reviews' quality became better, which here refers to their ability to articulate their own enthusiasm, personal style as well as knowledge of game cultures. On the other hand, some less regular assistant writers were seemingly quite pale Nirvi copies, because they lacked their role model's ability to describe gaming situations in a lively manner and lacked experience of game cultures and/or other forms of popular culture. Some reviewers, however, like technically oriented Jyrki J. J. Kasvi (1985–1992) and game designer Jukka Tapanimäki[10] had their own professional style. Tapanimäki's characteristic was the insertion of interesting background information about particular games which he reviewed. Hence, the turn of the decade was maturing period for Finnish game journalism. The publication of *Tietokonepelien vuosikirja* (Yearbook of computer games) and introduction of *Pelit* (Games) magazine occurred in this period. After that, changes do not appear to be so far-reaching. However, after this, the largest evolution has taken place in other media than in popular press, including the Internet.

When Nirvi moved to *Pelit* magazine, the quality of *MikroBitti*'s game reviews remained at high level. Jukka O. Kauppinen in particular, who had previously written for *C=lehti,* became one of the most important game critics. His style was little more low-key than Nirvi's, but Kauppinen also used humor, constructed game historical connections, and even more than Nirvi, referred to games with their abbreviations. Reason for utilization of abbreviations might have been in lengthier names of games or in the need for keeping the texts short enough. However, it was also a style which connected game reviews to wider technical inside discourse and traditions of IT jargon (see e.g. Barry 1991).

The Piira brothers who usually wrote together (reviews 1992–1999) and Petri Teittinen (1989–1997) were other essential game reviewers in the 1990s. Their style resembled that of Jukka O. Kauppinen's but was even more laid back. In the 2000s the most important reviewers (written most of the *MikroBitti*'s game reviews) have been Tapio Berschewsky (2005–), Janos Honkonen (2000–2006), Jarno Kokko (1995–2006), Juha Kettunen (2000–2006), Mikko Rautalahti (1999–2003), Mikko Siukola (2001–2005), Jori Virtanen (2000–2006) and Henrik Kärkkäinen (2009–).[11] Some reviews have been written by individuals who are known for their other actions, like game researcher Aki Järvinen (2000), founder of F-Secure computer security firm Risto Siilasmaa (1986), and novelist and script writer Mike Pohjola (2002).

Some reviewers focused on a particular game genre such as military strategy, role playing games, ice hockey games or golf simulators or a specific gaming device, but this sort of specializing seems quite exceptional in *MikroBitti*. Game reviews have not completely developed towards so called *genre critics* like reviews of television programs (cmp. Hietala 2009, 74–75). After 2006 almost all reviewers have changed, and the effect of this turn is not yet easy to analyze. It seems that Tapio Berschewsky's position as a game critic has strengthened. Lately, especially Berschewsky has used game historical references in his reviews and his unique style has evolved.

Almost all game reviewers are and have been men. Hence, David Nieborg and Tanja Sihvonen claim polemically that in game journalism, there is still a situation where boys write in an uncritical way to other boys (see also Ivory 2006).[12] In *MikroBitti*, the first female game reviewer was Jenni Alanen, who started as a teenager in 1995 and has written sporadically some reviews. Susi Vaasjoki (2000–2003) and Sanna Hanskala (2002–2004) have submitted a couple of reviews in the 2000s.[13] Vaasjoki and some other

critics have been active in science fiction and/or role playing scene, which has partially affected the selection of reviewed games.

Obviously, the popularity of different gaming devices affected the *MikroBitti*'s editorial policy. There has been many shifts from different home computer game reviews to Commodore 64 emphasis, Commodore Amiga and Atari ST, and in the 1990s, to PC gaming. Console games and downloadable mobile games have been reviewed mostly since the 2000s. Also the change from diskettes to CD-ROMs as main delivery format can be observed from the reviews in the 1990s. Sometimes, games were distributed both as CD-ROMs and diskettes, and *MikroBitti* published some special reviews of CD-ROM games. Those reviews resemble reviews of later DVD movies and not only described games, but also analyzed additional values and extras of CD-ROM distribution. CD-ROM format also influenced game contents, and some games were represented as interactive movies. Particularly Niko Nirvi wrote about games as interactive movies in his reviews in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

When focus shifted towards PC-gaming, reviewers began to take note of technical requirements: speed, graphics and sound and described the PC they had used while reviewing. There were some complaints about too extensive and thus expensive requirements for ideal gaming experience. At the same time, in the mid-1990s, referring to the magazine's own BBS service, and later on, to the website for getting game demos and bug fixing files increased. Nowadays, focus of reviews is in console games, but some PC game reviews continue to be published.

Moreover, the ways in which games have been evaluated, has changed several times. Initially, reviewers analyzed graphics and sounds and rated how interesting a particular game was with a scale from 4–10. This scale was known to the readers as it was also used in Finnish schools for grading. Overall evaluation of the games' quality was marked with stars from one to five like in cinema reviews. Thus, the scales acted as examples of how the criticism of the new media form were linked to familiar and recognizable practices of media criticism and therefore were easier to appropriate.

Later on, star marking was replaced by a comic strip character, whose expression indicated the games' overall quality. The figure was drawn by Harri Waalio (Wallu) and it was familiar from *MikroBitti*'s strip cartoon Mikrokivikausi (Micro Stone Age). The visual look and evaluation criteria were renewed again in the early 1990s. Then, reviews consisted of evaluation of graphics, sounds, playability and attraction. Maximum points of every aspect as well as overall conception was 100 points, and the overall grade was presented visually as a thermometer. In addition, the best games were also marked with a happy micro caveman drawn by Wallu. Later on that thermometer was turned from horizontal to vertical position, and in individual cases, reviewers were able to use some game specific criteria such as game realism and additional material. Furthermore, the games' price, name of the publisher and test computer was mentioned in every review. In 1992, *MikroBitti* abandoned thermometer graphics but evaluating categories remained the same. After that, reviews also contained short summaries of the games.

In 1998, the originality criterion replaced the attraction criterion, which emphasized innovativeness and uniqueness of new games. In the early 2000s, criteria remained the same and chances were effecter mostly in visual design of reviews. The next bigger modification took place in 2007, when *MikroBitti* returned to the old star classification. It harmonized game reviews to DVD movie and music album reviews which *MikroBitti*

began to publish after its merger with *Hifi Magazine*. *MikroBitti* started to seek more points of convergence to device testing as well, because since 2006, the pros and cons of the games began to be mentioned like in reviews of loud speakers, computers, and printers and so on. Since then, reviewers have also used descriptive titles. Before 2006, reviews were titled only with the games' names. Since then, the reviews titles have often included humoristic references to other popular cultural products or proverbs.

Game cultural references

> If unimaginative, dull and self-repeating real-time strategy point-and-click games have ever gotten up your nose, the true hangdog for their existing is Command&Conquer, published in 1995. (Tapio Berschewsky: *Command & Conquer 3* review, *MB* 5/2007.)

Despite of the changes in game reviews, there has not been a clear trend in references to other games or other media forms. These kinds of references have been done all the time. The practice, where references to other games were situated mostly in the beginning and the end of a review, became fixed very quickly. Those references introduced a novelty to readers and summarized the game at the end of the review. These allusions described game designers' or producers' previous productions, importance of possible game series and deciphered the background story, plot, contents or game mechanics and user interface. The references constructed, in their part, an internal history culture of gaming, the awareness about how individual games were related to other games and gaming practices.

Internal references to game culture can be divided at least into six types. One, reviews consist of references to previous games of the same sequel. This can be observed particularly in reviews of sports and car games (e.g. *NHL* and *FIFA* games) as well as in reviews of strategy and role playing games. Already in the early 1980s there were sequels for popular games such as *Pac-Man*, *Spy vs. Spy* etc. Two, there are allusions to games of the same programmer, designer or production companies. In some cases, game critics even define some national characteristics for game design practices: "Nebulus by John Phillips was one of the most ideated game for a 8-bit computer for one time.[…] A sequel for Nebulus was postponed a lot due to bankruptcy of Hewson.[…] But this time, challenge is almost a positive fact, although the game is, in British style, occasionally too frustrating." (Jukka Tapanimäki: *Nebulus 2: Pogo a Gog* review, *MB* 12/1991). As one can notice from the previous citation, there can also be references to a company, who had received a good reputation from one particular game or even from a game genre. In this way, Lucas Arts and Sierra Online got their high profile in graphical adventure games, Infocom with its text adventure games, Microprose with its simulators, SSI with strategy games and EA(Sports) with sport games:

> Microprose's debut in the demanding world of graphical mouse controlled adventure games is like Sierra's [Leisure suit] Larry in space, albeit technically, Rex Nebular is far more advanced than Larrys.[…] Mouse controlling is familiar from games of LucasArts and Sierra.[…] User interface of Rex Nebular wipes the floor with LucasArt's and Sierra's suchlike point-and-click systems. (Petri Teittinen: *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* review, *MB* 12/1992, 58.)

Reviewers handled some particular games as "classics". A classic, for example a first piece of a new game genre, might have acted as a comparison for games which resembled

the classic, such as maze game *Pac-Man* (1980), real-time strategy-point-and-click game *Command&Conquer* (1995), space simulator *Elite* (1984), *Ultima* role play game series (1980–), online roleplaying game *World of Warcraft* (2004), first person shooter *Doom* (1993) and urban constructing game *SimCity* (1989). These were not always the first games in their genre. Also, reviews could construct genealogies between several games or handle games as sort of genre hybrids: "After Doom comes Trials of Battle which makes little more slower computer's graphical board whining.[…] The game has been described as a combination of Quake and Mech Warrior, where rearmament of one's own ship has almost as important role as the destroying of the enemy." (Jere Käpyaho: *Trials of Battle* review, *MB* 4/1997, 100). "Game clone", referring to a lousy copy, emerged quickly as a negative counterpart to a classic. In some cases, the original comparison game was used as notorious evidence about how bad the new reviewed game was.

If needed, reviewers explained the plot and functionality of novelty in relation to more than one genre: "World of Oddworld is familiar from strange games Abe's Exoddus and Munch's Oddyssee which combine level jumping and puzzle games, but this time they have cross-breed level jumping and shooting.[…]shoot-em-jump-hybrid." (Mikko Ekholm: *Oddworld – Stranger's Wrath* review, *MB* 5/2005.) However, usually reviewers have not written about hybrids but combinations, and the reviewed game could also be a mix of individial games, not a genre hybrid.

The understanding of a review requires lot of game cultural related context knowledge, but it also provide hints about games, which might interest readers who want to know more about the genre. Hence, the internal game cultural references are a part of classification made by a game critic, and according to Kimmo Laine (2009, 83) classification is one of the most essential means of the cultural critic. Reviewing classifications are connected, for example, to authorship, nationality of media production or genre, which one can observe from game reviews as well.

Intermedial references to other forms of popular culture

> One has taken the model to a script from the Bold and the Beautiful, things are repeated so many times that even a dummy understands. (J. & P. Piira: *Lost Eden* review, *MB* 5/1995.)

> Nasty Nazis bandy schwein-hunds around like in the Commando comic book at its best, and now and then the game really succeeds reaching raffish one man's war or the atmosphere of somber film noir world. […] Another War is a game one would like to like – if not otherwise but because there is so few of Indiana Jones type of war adventures. (Susi Vaasjoki: *Another War* review, *MB* 12/2002.)

Intertextuality and intermediality are essential parts of game cultural history production. References place individual games, their critics and players – the entire game culture – in the changing network of media production and consumption. While the above mentioned game cultural references act perhaps in more internal micro level, intermediality takes references to more general stage. However, reference practices vary.

Intermediality means interaction between at least two media forms, which can occur between texts and productions. According to Juha Herkman (2005) intermediality can mean representation of one media technology with another media. For example, films can represent digital gaming or social media networks. Intermediality can also stand for the

introduction of television celebrities in magazines, tabloid papers or in the Internet sites. Third, it refers to productive synergy, when for example, the same piece of news is published and circulated in radio, television, teletext, and the Internet or when different media productions are marketed together (movie and a book about a game with some merchandises etc.).

I focus on intermediality where game reviews refer to some other media form or a product. These kinds of references are most obvious when the particular game is a direct translation from other media product, such as a film, novel or comic book (*James Bond*, *Ghostbusters* or *Harry Potter* game etc.). In addition to this, reviewer can use intermedial references to explain the game's atmosphere or plot:

> The game's designer might have seen the Aliens movie. But it's pointless to wait for some sort of monster hacking orgies, because Infestation is more like slow tempo vector graphical action adventure, which looks and feels very much like Freescape. […]Crawling in ventilation channels and browsing of building floor plans with computers are strongly Aliens-influenced ideas." (Jukka Tapanimäki: *Infestation* review, *MB* 5/1990)

Reviewers have mentioned at least six different media forms, typically related to popular culture or folklore: movies, television series, literature (especially science fiction, fantasy and horror), comic books, tales and mythologies (particularly ancient Greek and Roman as well as Nordic mythologies) and (media)sports. On many occasions, references to game cultural phenomena are connected to other popular cultural references, and therefore the referential practices can be defined as multi(re)mediation (on remediation, see Bolter & Grusin 1999):

> According to Erich von Däniken's theory, extraterrestrial intelligence directs development of human civilization by programming new ideas beforehand to human genes. Because of that, also big inventions are made in different places of the Globe at the same time. It seems that new game ideas belong to the same package, due to the fact that "driving and shooting" games have multiplied so rapidly.[…] Overlander is situated to Mad Max type of future.[…] If you are interested in idea of combination of Outrun and shooting, Overlander beats its rivals like Schwarzenegger pummels dwarfs, but those who are keen on more complicated action, will use a fast lane. (Niko Nirvi: *Overlander* review, *MB* 1988/12.)[14]

CONCLUSION

Game reviews construct historical awareness in the interface of art critics and technical testing

Veijo Hietala (2009, 72) argues that cultural critique has three tasks: description, analysis and evaluation[15]. The reviewer's aim is to introduce the object and the object's nature, and in extreme cases puffing (Hellman 2009). Also, reviewers characterize the games with different criteria and divisions, including music and sound effects, graphics, playability and innovativeness. References to other products of game cultures as well as popular culture in general, both report and evaluate.

References to other games and game designers explain the game's plot, genre, functionality or user interface. Allusions to other popular cultural products and forms are mostly related to the game's plot or the nature of the game's world: they portray the game's atmosphere. There are not only explicit references to the named other product, but also implicit references to the characters of a certain genre (such as science fiction style portraying of space, Tolkien's fantasy world, medieval knight romance, WWII war fiction etc.). Reviewers can use humor when they try to identify and share common experiences with the audience, not only about games, but also about other interests.

As a literal genre, game review is a mix of art critique and technical testing. Reviewers have to master both, and they have to be skillful writers, know games and diverse gaming devices and have time to play games as much as possible. It is one form of historical awareness, when reviews master all the above mentioned skills and traditions in harmony.

The purpose of technical testing is to measure and weight certain commonly decided features of games as objectively as possible. With measurements and scaling it is possible to compare different products and put them to an order of superiority.

Art critiquing is more subjective or at least more subject orientated, even though reviewer would seek independent interpretation about a particular game. Reviewer's own personal impression and experience on the game's playability and multimodal aesthetics is essential. Reviewers' style is personal, and the reader might identify herself or himself with the reviewer as a gamer; readers rarely seek objective knowledge about the games' features and critics do not isolate themselves from the audience as some Finnish cinema critics have been blamed of doing (Lehtisalo 2009, 7). Game critics who write to their "own people", do not have to pursue similar semi-objectivism as is the case with cinema critics (cmp. Kivimäki 2001, 285). They do not have to act as cultivators of good game cultural taste and norms (cmp. Sarjala 1994). On the other hand, this can lead to a situation, where the game industry is able to lead uncritical mass of reviewers and audiences.

In more artistic reviews, games are compared to game or genre classics, even though in some cases games could not necessarily have been characterized as unique art works or gaming as an art form comparable to the art criticism of the 19th century (Lehtisalo 2009, 7). Good games bring something new to their genre, combine different genre features or even create new genre.

The visual appearance and style of game reviews have changed over decades. However, it is difficult to discover clear trajectory for the change. It appears that at least to some degree, the game cultural references have become more typical in comparison to intermedial popular cultural references since the 1990s. In addition to this, it seems that looking to the past has become more common during the game cultural maturation process and when particular reviewers have become more experienced. In sum, game critics construct game cultural heritage and select tangible and intangible elements, which are considered as worth of preserving by a community or a group.

Naming a game as a classic is a part of history discourse, where game cultural changes and valuations are articulated. History discourse consists of many expressions which construct historical awareness, including "historical", "generations", "veterans", "earlier

forms", "recollection", "young/old", "legendary", "pioneers", and so on. The following citation by Jukka O. Kauppinen contains the early Finnish use of the term "retro game":

> Midway company created many classic coin-up games in the early 80s. Those games were ported to varying microcomputers of that time. For the joy of moss-bearded old-timers, still hanging Midway has packed seven historical coin-up games to Windows-shelves. Members of younger generation can be sure about a cultural shock. […] Games were simple, but most of all, one aimed to inject juicy playability to them. Also all of those seven games of the Midway collection represent strictly this early period, before the Great Crash of Videogames, 1983-1984. Many games bear familiar, classical names.[…] Windows translations, they have not treated those golden memories impolitely either.[…] There are no complaints about the working of the retro games. […] a positive experience, and suits well for those who are interested in history of coin-up games / computer games and to micro veterans who are tuning their recollections of the early 80s. (Jukka O. Kauppinen: *Midway Arcade's Greatest Hits* review, *MB* 5/1998.)

Historical awareness in this context can point to two directions. First, game critics are able to bring up their own or game community's defined classics. Second, critics have to have an ability to recognize a historical moment or a contemporary turning point when they review a new game.[16]

Meaning of the study and possibilities for further investigation

This paper has made an overview about changes in game reviews, based on a Finnish case study. The aim of the paper has been to present how the reviews can be used as a tool for analyzing historical construction and the emergence of game historical awareness, and of digital game media and players. First, the paper proves that the construction process occurs on many levels. On the one hand, it can been seen on how a particular game magazine can react to changes in cultural and societal position of digital gaming by developing new practices for publication of game reviews (headlining, size and placement of reviews, scaling, recruiting of reviewers etc.). The changes in publication policy have been linked to increasing awareness of journalistic practices and traditions. Thus, those changes, sort of external features, are not particularly new, but rather means to appropriate game reviews to other forms of critique and journalism.

Second, the emergence of historical awareness and understanding can be noticed when following more internal features of review texts, stylistic characteristics of individual game reviewers and changes in game review genre in general: how game critics contextualize particular games by making references to other games, genres and so forth as well as to referring to other popular cultural phenomena. They have to also be capable to use means of both cultural critique and technical testing traditions. Some reviewers succeed well in this, while some others not. In addition, one can notice reviewers' individual and collective "maturation" when they begin to refer more often to "game classics", "pioneers" and old times, thus, beginning to develop, utilize and clearly articulate *game history discourse* in their reviews. That does not demonstrate only ageing of reviewers but ageing of digital game cultures as a whole and the emerging need for a revisit to its own past.

International comparative studies on game journalism offer probably the most obvious directions for further investigation, but there are several other possibilities as well. One could approach relation between journalists and readers by using game critics as sources. For example, how have changes in circulation and reader profiles been represented in game reviews? How have structural changes in the game industry, and its relation to game journalism, affected the reviews? Is there, for instance, a correlation between review success and market success of games (see also Joeckel 2007)? What kind of anomalies are there, when opinions of reviewers and market success differ from each other? One could also study indirectly how game genres emerge as practical and discursive revolutional turns, in slower evolution or as hybridization.

Furthermore, it would be vital to analyze in greater detail those practices and discourses in which game cultural self-understanding and historical awareness are constructed. For example, are there similar shades of contemporary nihilism (Saarenmaa 2009, 90)[17] as in cinema criticism? One aim of this study has been to gain a deeper understanding of game journalistic practices and to develop a specific research methodology for this purpose. However, it is not only a question of academic interest. The study would increase public awareness of game journalism and hopefully encourage the development of more varying forms of game journalism. Even though chances have occurred due to the Internet and social media, game journalism is still too one-sided. The increase in attention to games will not automatically improve the quality of game journalism or its diversity. In all probability, the reverse would be true.

ENDNOTES

[1] The paper is based on work published in Finnish in 2010 (Suominen 2010) but developed, chronologically extended and revised from it.

[2] I use the terms "game criticism" and "game reviews" synonymously even though the they can be defined as different concepts. Wide interpretation of game criticism would include all game related journalism and also critical studies (so-called Anglo-American definition for "criticism", see e. g. Kivimäki 2001. On game criticism more generally, see e. g. Thomas et al. 2009).

[3] In addition to this, importing companies have occasionally published game magazines, such as *Nintendo*-lehti (Nintendo Magazine) in Finland 1990-1994 by Semic.

[4] The British *Computer and Video Games* has been called the first magazine in the world focusing on digital gaming. On development of game journalism in different countries, see e. g. Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009.

[5] With *game culture* I mean widely all kinds of digital game related practices. Game culture consists not only of game production and playing, but also of public debates on gaming, advertising, marketing, legislation and so on. One can also talk about game cultures, where different cultures are related to varying groups and localities, which have individual gaming practices (see also Mäyrä 2008).

[6] Cultural historian Hannu Salmi (2001) divides five forms of cultures of history. The past is present as memory, experience, practices, cultural artifacts and commodities (see also Suominen 2008). The concept of cultures of history emerged particularly in German historiography debate in the 1980s.

[7] This exclude the first year, 1984, when there were only few issued published. Therefore I selected only one issue for research material. I have not either included short reviews, dealing with

many games (such as downloadable games for mobile devices) or such more general game related articles, where is not numerical evaluation of games.

[8] I conducted the tabulation personally for 1984–2001 and 2009–2010 during, 2008–2011. Research assistant Taina Graan tabulated game reviews for 2002–2008 in summer 2009.

[9] There are 53 Nirvi's reviews in the research sample, which is the second largest amount after Jukka O. Kauppinen (94). Risto Hieta's (Nordic) role playing articles improved also the quality of *MikroBitti*'s early game journalism.

[10] Reviews in *MikroBitti* 1989–1991, 12 texts in the sample.

[11] Number of reviews in the research sample: Tapio Berschewsky 48, Jarno Kokko 45, J. & P. Piira 33, Petri Teittinen 32, Janos Honkonen 19, Mikko Rautalahti 19, Mikko Siukola 18 , Juha Kettunen 16, Jori Virtainen 15, Henrik Kärkkäinen 12.

[12] Nieborg and Sihvonen also question independency of game journalists from game industry.

[13] There are 5 reviews by Jenni Alanen, 6 by Susi Vaasjoki and 2 by Sanna Hanskala in the research material selection. *Pelit* magazine has had a long term female editor-in-chief, Tuija Lindén, who previously worked for *MikroBitti*.

[14] In *MikroBitti*, Niko Nirvi has been the most versatile reviewer in using such references. He has been interested especially in cinema. In general, references between cinema and games are the most common ones. This means mentions of individual movies by name, but also discussion about games as interactive cinema. One possible target for further investigation would be, then, to focus more specifically to the ways in which reviews construct relations between gaming and films.

[15] Hietala, however, ponders with the question whether such division is usable with all genres of media criticism. Hietala makes also distinguishes between art criticisms, author based criticism, realism criticism, genre criticism, ideological and moral criticism, auteur criticism, and aesthetic-formalistic criticism. The classification is based on television and cinema but it is at least partially applicable to game criticism.

[16] An exceptionality of a novelty is typically represented as a positive thing, but not always: "… unless the whole thing was not ruined with one of the most horrible user interfaces in history." (Janos Honkonen: *Fast Food Tycoon* review, *MB* 12/2001.)

[17] According to Laura Saarenmaa, contemporary nihilism represented a view that old media productions have been superior in comparison to new ones.

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