

JYU DISSERTATIONS 474

Tero Kerttula

(Broad)casting the Game

**The Spectacle of Real in Representing
and Narrating Video Game Play**



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The Spectacle of Real in Representing and Narrating Video Game Play

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ABSTRACT

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Video games have been a notable part of our lives for a long time now, and also in non-playable ways. The games and the action of gaming have been possible to consume through reading magazines and web pages, watching television and in these days, through online videos. In this compilation dissertation I look at the ways the media has used and presented video games and video gaming in the past 40 years. My aim is to prove, that through different means of presentation the role of the player in these presentations rises to equal the role of the games and even surpasses that. At the same time, I attempt to put these presentations in a media-historical timeline and point out the similarities between modern self-made videos and the television productions and games journalism of the past.

I research the subject in the preface through the concept of the media spectacle and I'll also look at the articles the dissertation consists of through the same concept. The concept of the spectacle makes it possible to look at the different media productions from commercialist and nationalistic angle and also to see, which kind of elements of power in present in these productions.

The articles approach the subject through narrativization, oral history and triangulation. One notable part of the research is the data compiled of different television shows about video games from the 1980s to present day. With the help of different articles and methods, the research as a whole draws numerous similarities between the media spectacles about video games of the past and modern media productions.

The results of the research are many. From the angle of the spectacle, the modern Let's Play -videos have connections to early television shows and other audiovisual productions. One specific similarity is the emphasis in the presentation of the player instead of the game. Because the early television shows tried to market the games to the audience by using visual methods also seen in sports spectacles, they also marketed the experience of playing video games.

The role of the player is also a role of a narrator. Let's Play -videos can be seen as a specific kind of stories about how the game in the video was like to play. At the same time the videos show the relationship between the player and the game, for example by oral history. This makes the Let's Play -videos a part of the research of the history of video games and video game culture. These stories have also their roots in the media history. The stories were told especially in video game magazines and their role were quite the same as in the Let's Plays, to tell a story about a video game experience in a review or a walkthrough.

The research also makes a note about competitive gaming – or eSports – and the evolution of it through these media spectacles. From the results it is seen that the modern eSports broadcasts are in many ways alike to early television shows, which incorporated competitive gaming as a part of the show. Those shows in their own turn took influence from sports broadcasts. At the same time the findings suggest, that in the eSports broadcasts the games are comparable to sport disciplines, where the attention in on the athlete, but also on the other factors influencing the spectacle, like the sponsors.

Keywords: video games, history, television, spectacle

TIIVISTELMÄ

Kerttula, Tero

Lähetettyä pelaamista: todellisuuden speaktaakkeli videopelaamisen representaatioissa ja kerronnallistamisessa

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Videopelit ovat olleet arjessamme jo pitkään, muutenkin kuin pelattavassa muodossa. Pelejä ja pelaamista on voinut kuluttaa lukemalla lehtiä ja verkkosivuja, katsomalla televisiota ja nykyään suuressa määrin internetin videopalvelujen kautta. Tässä artikkeliväitöskirjassa tarkastelen niitä tapoja, joilla videopelejä on eri medioissa esitetty ja käsitelty viimeisen neljänkymmenen vuoden aikana. Tarkoitukseni on osoittaa, että eri esitystapojen kautta pelaajan rooli nousee näissä esityksissä pelien rinnalle ja jopa niiden ohi. Samalla tarkoitukseni on sijoittaa erilaiset peliesitykset mediahistorialliselle aikajanelle ja osoittaa yhtäläisyydet nykyaikaisten itse tehtyjen videoiden ja aiempien televisiotuotantojen ja journalismin välillä.

Lähestyn asiaa johdanto-osassa mediaspektaakkelin käsitteen kautta ja käsittelem myös työhön liitettyjä artikkeleita tästä näkökulmasta. Speaktaakkelin käsite mahdollistaa erilaisten mediatuotantojen tarkastelun siten, että niitä on mahdollista pohtia taloudellisten ja nationalististen näkökulmien läpi, sekä myös pohtia millaisia vallan elementtejä näihin speaktaakkeleihin liittyy.

Tutkimukseen liitetyt artikkelit käsittelevät aihetta kerronnallistamisen, muistitiedon ja aineistotriangulaation kautta. Oleellinen osa tutkimusta on myös sitä varten koostettu taulukkoaineisto videopelejä käsittelevistä televisio-ohjelmista 1980-luvulta nykypäivään. Eri artikkelien ja tutkimusmenetelmien avulla koko tutkimus piirtää lukuisia yhtäläisyyksiä menneiden vuosien videopelejä käsittelevien mediaspektaakkeleiden ja modernien lähestymistapojen välillä.

Tutkimuksesta nousee esiin useita oleellisia havaintoja. Speaktaakkelin näkökulmasta nykyisissä Let's Play -videoissa on havaittavissa yhteyksiä varhaisiin televisio-ohjelmiin ja muihin vastaaviin audiovisuaalisiin tuotantoihin. Erityiseksi yhtäläisyydeksi nousee pelaajan kuvaaminen ja tämän esille nostaminen itse pelin sijasta. Koska varhaiset televisio-ohjelmat pyrkivät markkinoimaan pelejä, käyttämällä muun muassa urheilulähetyksissä käytettyjä mediaspektaakkelin keinoja, ne markkinoivat myös pelikokemusta.

Pelaajan rooli nousee nykyisissä tuotannoissa esille myös kertojana. Let's Play -videot voidaan nähdä erityisinä kertomuksina siitä, millaista videossa nähtävää peliä on pelata. Samalla videoista nousee esille myös pelaajan oma suhde pelattavana olevaan peliin, esimerkiksi muistelun kautta. Täten osa Let's Play -videoista palvelee myös pelien historian ja pelikulttuurin tutkimusta. Pelikertomuksilla on myös omat perinteensä videopelien mediahistoriassa. Pelikertomuksia on kerrottu erityisesti videopelilehtien palstoilla jo varhain ja näillä kertomuksilla on ollut yleisön näkökulmasta samanlainen rooli kuin Let's Play -videoilla, eli kertoa peliarvion tai läpipeluuohjeen yhteydessä tarina pelikokemuksesta.

Oleelliseksi havainnoksi tutkimus nostaa myös kilpapelaaamisen, eli e-urheilun kehittymisen nykymuotoonsa näiden mediaspektaakkeleiden kautta. Tuloksista käy ilmi, että modernit kilpapelilähetykset ovat monilla tavoin samankaltaisia kuin esimerkiksi 1980-luvun varhaiset kilpapelaaamista sisältäneet televisio-ohjelmat, jotka puolestaan ottivat vaikutteita urheilulähetyksistä. Samalla kilpapelaaamista koskevat havainnot nostavat esiin myös sen, miten kilpapelilähetyksissä itse peli on verrattavissa urheilulajiin, jossa huomiosta kilpailevat pelaajat, mutta myös muut tuotantoon vaikuttavat tekijät, kuten sponsorit.

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FOREWORD

Different roads lead to different results. My road towards this dissertation has been quite the story, which has taught me an important lesson about myself as a writer, about working with other people and in the end, about life itself. In this story, there have been many characters, to whom I am very grateful for giving me the opportunity and support, who allowed me to make the most of this dissertation.

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A thank you is also in order to my colleagues at the Universities of Jyväskylä, Tampere and Turku. Especially Tanja, Jonne, Maria and Matti, which whom I have had the priviledge to work, discuss and travel during this time. Heta and Elina, thank you for being the best office colleagues and putting up with me so well.

A big thank you is also in order to my family. My parents and my siblings, thank you for the patience and trust, this would have been a whole lot harder a road to walk without your support. Also thank you my dear friend Anne, who gave me the idea of pursuing this road in the first place. Thank you so much for the youth spent together and for being an excellent parent to our child. She is also one to thank, as she has had the misfortune of standing my sense of humor for all these years and still being there for me. Face each new sun with eyes clear and true, unafraid of the unknown, because I'll face it all with you.

I would also thank my disc golfing friends, with which I've travelled the country back and forth with our plastic discs. The time spent with you on the course and on the road has been a priviledge. I'd also like to thank my friends at the National Library of Finland. No game of Rocket League or NHL has gone without a laughter.

Finally, I'd like to thank my dear friends at the Pelit.fi -community. I've been a part of this ragtag companionship for nearly twenty years and during that time, I've seen you all grow from video game enthusiastic teens to middle aged people. I've shared many joys and pains, laughter and tears with you and stood beside many a friend in our time together. Live long and prosper. Thank you.

Jyväskylässä 15.11.2021

Tero Kerttula

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"I do that myself sometimes. I just wander up to my own bookshelf and remark how crappy my books are."

- Noah Antwiler aka. The Spooky One

1 INTRODUCTION

I was born in 1982. People in my age group are usually referred to as early millennials, or “xennials” (see Dotson et. al. 2018), as we shared many cultural items, such as music and video games, with “Generation X” in our childhood before adopting the Internet and mobile devices in our late teens or early adulthood, in comparison to millennials who came upon these things earlier in their lives. My very first gaming device was a Pong-console, followed by computers and consoles from every technological generation. The 8-bit era, 16-bit wars, the rise of the Sony PlayStation, and many other advances were a big part of my life as I was growing up.

As I matured, I came to witness the whole video game industry and culture change. In the 1990s it was common to gather at a friend’s house after school to play video games. Whenever there was a gaming device available, be it the Commodore 64, the Nintendo Entertainment System¹, the Sega Mega Drive² or the Amiga 500, borrowing games from friends, playing together and watching friends play was a normal way of spending our time, alongside other leisurely activities such as playing soccer or skateboarding. Without this childhood, I would never have played or witnessed as many now-classic games as I have.

By playing together, my friends and I gathered a great amount of information about different video games and platforms. This information was important to us: how else could we have argued what games and systems were good or not? You had to know the games to participate in the fierce and relentless lunch break console wars. It was a big deal.

However, social interaction was not the only way of gathering information. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, video game magazines and television shows played a huge role in our decisions. We had to resort to reviews, screenshots and commercials to make up our minds as to what games to buy or avoid. We needed someone else’s opinion about it and of course, the games had to look desirable. As it has been shown in previous research (see e.g. Newman 2013; Taylor 2012), besides being just entertainment, watching video games played on television

¹ Abbr. NES

² In the United States Sega Genesis

shows and online have also served an informatics purpose. Before the times of the internet, television shows, VHS-tapes and later DVDs were the only way to obtain moving images from games not yet played or even released.

Some video game magazines, such as *PC Gamer* (Great Britain/Future Publishing 1993 – current) and *Amiga Power* (Great Britain/Future Publishing 1991-1996) came with cover floppy disks or CDs that had video demos or trailers of upcoming video games along playable demo versions of video games. The other way of getting to see video game footage without playing the game was to visit a friend or to watch a video game-themed television show.

In the early 2000s, things changed quickly. Magazines like *Official Xbox Magazine* (Future Publishing 2001-current) and *PlayStation Official Magazine* (Future Publishing 2006-current) started to disappear from Finnish stores and Finnish television shows about video games vanished completely. As the Internet took over, more and more ways of expressing video gaming as a hobby began to appear. From the early online discussions at message boards and FTP³ file sharing onwards, people started to create and share these new products, such as levels and mods for video games, to an ever-growing audience.

One of these creative products was the “Let’s Play” video format. I remember seeing my first Let’s Play in 2008; it was about a person playing through the entirety of *Phantasmagoria 2* (Sierra On-Line 1996), while recording and narrating his playing experience. That person was Noah Antwiler, or *The Spooky One*. By that point, Let’s Plays had started to appear in increasing volumes. I was not watching television anymore; instead, I moved my gaze towards the computer screen, and so did millions of others. For example, in three years’ time, the Let’s Play of *Dark Souls 3* (From Software 2016) by *FightinCowboy* gathered over a 4.2 million views⁴. The most viewed Let’s Play now by November 2021 in YouTube is a Let’s Play of *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation 2006) by *Kaji Family*, which has amassed 114 million views in four years of time⁵. While the popularity of the game does affect the amount of different Let’s Plays and viewers of those online, the number of views tells a story of its own considering the global popularity of the online phenomenon.

While gathering together to play was still common, seeing unknown people play and make fun of games on the Internet was the future. This was the case everywhere in the world, not just in Finland. Ever since the era of arcades, watching other people play video games and competitive play have been notable parts of video game culture. Be it by gathering around arcade machines or - like me and my friends - around a video game console at friends’ house, watching others play has been almost as big a part of the whole video game experience as playing on your own. This is not a notion that everyone might agree with, however. For example, Doug Walker, aka. *The Nostalgia Critic*, stated in his 2008 review of the movie *The Wizard* (Universal Pictures/Todd Holland 1989):

³ File Transfer Protocol

⁴ Dark Souls 3 – Let’s Play Part 1: Cemetery of Ash.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTEIUoAPR0g> Retrieved 12.12.2019

⁵ Despicable Me 3 Minion Game! Oh No Floor is Lava! Let’s Play Roblox with Ryan’s Family Review. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMrBgcPIG5M> Retrieved 15.11.2021

“Bottom line, it’s always more fun to actually play video games, than it is to watch people play video games.”⁶

As times have gone by and the technology behind games has evolved, people still gather around to watch other people play games. These days YouTube videos of gameplay, online streams, and different types of online shows about video games are hugely popular, as is electronic sports. Even though much of the watching happens online, people still gather at friends’ homes to watch, for example, huge e-sports tournaments together. In Katowice, Poland, in 2019 approximately 174,000 people attended the Intel Extreme Masters tournament on site, while according to different sources around 232 million people watched the tournament online⁷.

The growth in the number of online watchers, especially, has been noticed by video game companies and marketing people. As traditional video game journalism and entertainment shifted away from printed video game magazines and television shows, more of the marketing from major video game publishers has been focused on YouTubers and online streamers. As amateurs are giving the games attention through YouTube, video game companies have started to see the benefit of Let’s Plays in the marketing and sale of their games. (Taylor 2015, 259–260, 270.)

This has led to a peculiar situation where video game companies are ready to pay a lot of money to Let’s Players and streamers for coverage of their game, while many video game review sites have struggled or ceased to be. In one example, video game studio Rockfish Games agreed to pay 5000€ per hour to a video game streamer for playing their game *Everspace* (Rockfish Games 2017). However, the company did not have control over how their game was presented. The studio had assumed that the streamer would play the game professionally and present different aspects of the product during the stream. Instead, the streamer in question played the game deliberately badly and made the game look worse than Rockfish Games intended. The developers had not watched the streamer’s previous videos and were caught by surprise by the nature of the streams. (Martin 2018)

Meanwhile former big media websites have converged and many have even been shut down, including 1Up.com, GameSpy, and Unified Gamers Online⁸ when their owner Imagine Games Network⁹ decided to focus on their biggest media brand, the website IGN (Sliwinski 2013). Each of the sites were online for over 15 years and gained a notable following before going offline.

This makes the sign of the times clear. As amateur productions have gained a notable foothold through YouTube and Twitch, professional video game journalism faces new difficulties as to keep up with this evolution and need to change their methods of sharing information. In addition, more and more

⁶ Nostalgia Critic – The Wizard – YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jUqOxyQyaI>

⁷ <https://about.eslgaming.com/blog/2019/03/esl-and-intel-welcomed-174000-fans-at-worlds-most-attended-esports-event-and-most-watched-esl-csgo-tournament-ever/>

⁸ Abbr. UGO

⁹ Abbr. IGN

amateur producers are becoming professionals through advertising and other kinds of revenue, even though the income itself doesn't differentiate an amateur from a professional. Because these professional producers have millions of followers everywhere in social media, video game companies have also seen the possibilities of marketing and presenting their products through various methods.

With the activity of video gaming growing in popularity, it is necessary to note that amateur productions did not appear suddenly from out of nowhere. In a 2015 article on the website Kotaku about the birth of the Let's Play (Klepek 2015), it was noted in many comments how people recorded their video gaming in VHS-format in the 1980s and 1990s:

"In 1991 my dad recorded himself playing Pinbot (NES) for six hours straight. It was lots of cursing."

"Back in the day (1989?) a friend and I recorded ourselves eating twizzlers, listening to De La Soul and playing Zelda. We were 14 and thought we were hilarious."

Even professional YouTube producers mention these activities sometimes in their videos. James Rolfe, aka. The Angry Video Game Nerd, even incorporated parts of his own childhood home videos in his 2012 review of the NES-game Ghosts N' Goblins¹⁰. It is presumable that these early home videos were for family use only and probably were used only as broadly as to show them to other relatives during family gatherings or other similar occasions. As video cameras and VHS-tapes were somewhat expensive in the early days of their availability, it is peculiar that some people saw video gaming as such an important and exciting activity that filming someone playing a video game was worth the while.

In my research, I have looked at this evolution of video game play presentation in visual media. While the research is focused on live-action media, I also refer to print media and written Let's Play -stories, as they are an important set piece of narrating video game play. This study started in 2014 as a research on the Let's Play phenomenon. However, as the years went on, Let's Playing evolved into different directions and keeping up with the times in the research became difficult. Because of this, it seemed more useful to look more into the past to create an image of how watching video game play changed during the years and how it became the widely known cultural aspect of the whole video game industry today. I will also look at competitive gaming as a part of the evolution through its history, spectatorship and how it connects visually to older media products.

¹⁰ Ghosts N' Goblins - Angry Video Game Nerd - Episode 108 - YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94Y6y1MOoEo>

1.1 Research questions and problems

The aim of this research is to find distinctive ways of presenting the activity of playing a video game, which differentiate them from each other. These live-action presentations, where the video game footage is paired with people playing or commenting them, are looked at as media spectacles. As the online video services have given both professionals and amateurs a channel to express video gaming in different ways, this form of expression and its evolution is important to put under a magnifying glass. The research questions regarding the study and the articles are as follows:

RQ1) What are the characteristics of a media spectacle in different types of live-action presentations of video game play?

When looked at as media spectacles, the presentations of video game play in live-action media might give a deeper insight into each type of these presentations. The aim of this question is to define the different characteristics of the media spectacle in each type of presentation to help to further the analysis regarding the media spectacle.

RQ2) How does the media spectacle affect the presentation of video game play?

Continuing from the first research question, the aim here is to find out what the media spectacle reveals from each type of live-action presentation of video game play. This question contains then an assumption of the media spectacle's being used as a commercial vessel for the companies behind and supporting the broadcasts.

RQ3) How has broadcasting video game play evolved from its origins?

As the research material shows, the live-action presentations of video game play have changed and evolved a lot in the timeframe of 40 years seen in this study. Through this question, the goal is to find out how and why the video game broadcasts have evolved throughout the years and how has the media spectacle involved changed in the process.

1.2 Research ethics and legality

This research did not involve any human subjects by way of interviews or collecting any personal information about the subject. All research materials, excluding the television show data, are publicly available for anyone. I took all citations and images from the original sources, with applicable references included. I did not collect or store any personal information of the persons referenced in this research in an external storage, such as an external hard drive,

USB drive or cloud storage. I did not download or store any YouTube videos to an external storage due to the copyrights of the said videos.

I refer to the online personalities discussed in the research by both their real names and their online aliases. This is because the information about their names is publicly available through interviews¹¹, news and different wiki-sites, and, in many cases, commonly known as the name is presented in the website the material was originally posted to. The other reason of doing this is that the distinction between an online personality as a fictitious character and the person behind the character is an important notion throughout the study. I do not refer to the online personalities by sensitive personal information, such as their addresses or birth information. The research does not harm or compromise individual persons or their identities.

I did all references to the YouTube-material used in this research by referring to the original creator of the video. I refer to the television shows with the original broadcaster and the production company. The material used in this research was necessary to use, as the research will benefit the video game companies, the video game media and the knowledge towards the whole culture of video gaming.

The copyright-section of YouTube rights states that the videos are available to use for review or research according to the law of each country mentioned in the section¹². With this, YouTube refers to the Fair Use law that is applicable in The United States. The Fair Use does not apply to Europe, however. Therefore, my citations and images from the research material conform to the Finnish Copyright-law, more specifically the Right of Citation (Tekijänoikeuslaki 2015/607 § 22¹³).

It needs to be noted that because I do not own the permissions or rights to the media-material discussed in the research and therefore cannot save online-material to my computer, some of the videos mentioned in the research might be taken offline in due time. Because of this, preservation methods, especially for the television shows, are necessary to invent so as to establish a coherent database for future research.

1.3 Structure of the study

The study begins with the summary of the theoretical approaches and frameworks used in the study, both in this introduction chapter and in the articles. As each article uses a different approach, I will explain the use of different theories in light of their contribution to the study. This part also consists of the explanation of how my research material was chosen and the different ways of collecting it. As the research material is vast and varied, it is not ideal to reveal

¹¹ See e.g. <https://bloody-disgusting.com/interviews/3553131/interview-james-rolfe-angry-video-game-nerd-cinemassacre-talks-horror-gaming-past-present/>

¹² YouTube - Terms and Conditions <https://www.youtube.com/t/terms>

¹³ <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2015/20150607> Retrieved 24.1.2020

the methods of collecting each video used, but rather the most important ones and the data.

Chapter 3 makes a distinction between different types of visual presentations of video games and opens by positioning the research in the current field of studies on each mode of live-action video game play presentation. In this chapter, I will also analyze the research material through the viewpoint of the media spectacle. This is an important part of the study, as even though my articles do not necessarily address each type of visual material, the distinctions can be, in some cases, hard to make. In addition, when talking about the narrative, the narrated reviews and walkthrough in video game journalism are necessary to point out, as they contribute to the field of Let's Play in their own right.

In the next part of the dissertation, I will summarize the most important research results of each article included in the research. Three out of four articles are in English, while one of them is in Finnish. Because of this, opening up the results from the Finnish study is important. Along with the results from each individual article, in the next chapter I will review the research questions provided in this dissertation and answer them.

After the results, I will conclude the research with discussion in view of further studies in this field and an evaluation of my research questions presented for this dissertation. In the last section I will conclude the thesis and reflect the study as a whole.

2 METHODS, CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The research in this thesis was conducted with different theoretical approaches. For the first two articles I used a narrative viewpoint, while with the other two I used a collected dataset of the television shows to find qualitative results. The narrative methods were used in the two first articles from different viewpoints, while the analysis was based on a case study of selected online works.

The main theoretical framework in this dissertation is built on the concept of media spectacle. The concept is used here to look at the research material gathered in the articles from a different viewpoint. The articles themselves revolve around a couple of other key concepts, such as representation, which I will also discuss further in this chapter. As I use the concepts in multiple ways in different research, my take on the subject is necessary for further discussion.

I look at the represented video game play as a phenomenon of its own. Through this, the television shows, online videos and journalistic content are framed as individual media products, ruling out the actual video game content from the analysis. Therefore, my research leans more towards media research rather than video game research.

2.1 The media spectacle and a notion of the real

The concept of spectacle has been discussed and criticized by many researchers from a multitude of different angles. There is often a political discourse to spectacles, as well as a historical one. Examples vary from discussing the fascist spectacles in the Third Reich (Falasca-Zamponi 1997), spectacles as a ritual in ancient Rome (Feldherr 1998) and discussing Dubai as an urban and political spectacle (Elsheshtawy 2010) to discussing professional wrestling as a sports spectacle (Mazer 1998). As the discourses around spectacles are so varied, in this chapter I will explain my personal take on the concept and the theoretical

backgrounds of my study regarding media spectacles. I looked at the concept of a spectacle through the lenses of commercialism, nationalism and spectatorship.

Probably the most famous study concerning spectacles is Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which Debord develops the concept of the spectacle and criticizes it as a means of boosting commercialism and nationalism. Debord sees the spectacle as something that falls upon the whole of society, controlling it and hiding capitalist powers from public eyes. As Debord's thesis 4 says:

"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images".

These viewpoints are later underlined in Debord's own comments about the spectacle two decades later, in *Comments on the Society and the Spectacle* (1990).

As to this research, Douglas Kellner's (2003) views of the spectacle, based on Debord's writings nearly four decades earlier, seemed more coherent, as Kellner discusses the spectacle through several viewpoints similar to my research. Kellner's analysis of basketball and Michael Jordan's superstardom in particular proved to be useful. Kellner consider Jordan as an "icon of the sports spectacle", who was able to transform his sports achievements into commercial success through his image as an athlete. This, according to Kellner, is possible because of the nature of spectating sports, which is "passive consumption of images of the sports spectacle". (Kellner 2003, 64-65). I agree with Kellner's definition of the spectacle as a media cultural phenomenon, which, through audio-visual means, dramatizes the events of the coeval world by embodying the social values of the time (Kellner 2003, 2).

A crucial aspect of the spectacle according to Debord (1969, e.g. Theses 20, 22 & 25), is power. Debord sees spectacles as vessels of governmental and economic powers, thus as something that upkeeps the power of the creator of the spectacle. It is also noteworthy that Debord sees that politics and bureaucracy are spectacles in their own right (ibid., Thesis 57). According to Kellner, in media spectacles one power that the media spectacles have to upkeep, is the power of the media itself. Through the power of the media come other powers that the spectacle has to upkeep, such as political, commercial and nationalistic powers (Kellner 2003, 1, 25, 38 & 56). Kellner gives several examples of this, such as The Super Bowl and, more specifically, the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City 2002. The Super Bowl is referred to as a commercial spectacle, while in Salt Lake City the sports spectacle aimed to obscure several kinds of shenanigans happening behind the scenes (Kellner 2003, 23-25). According to Marcella Szablewicz (2016), this was also the case in China, where the local *Warcraft III* - championship tournaments were used to promote nationalist ideology through spectacle (Szablewicz 2016, 260-262; 269-271).

As researchers have shown throughout the decades, especially sports spectacles are an effective way of marketing different goods that are not necessarily connected to the sport itself (e.g. Real 1975, 35; Gruneau 1989, 139-140; McAllister 1998, 358-360). Because of this, it is safe to assume that the

television shows featured in my research were also commercial spectacles, advertising the games and products featured. Looking at the events in current day and age, it seems that the powers behind the sports spectacles are very visible, and they cannot be hidden under a spectacle as the spectacular events are facing resistance and criticism. The most recent examples of this are the Ice Hockey World Championships 2021 held in Belarus and Latvia and the football World Cup 2022 held in Qatar. Because of problematic political situations and human rights infringements in Belarus and Qatar, there has been a wide-ranged discussion among press and the athletes that the events should not be held in those countries as a political protest. This discussion later led to for example moving the IIHF tournament away from Belarus (Walker 2021).

Considering sports spectacles further in relation to the video game television shows, it is worth revisiting television shows like *Starcade*, which can be seen as one of the originators of eSports broadcasting. As the competitive gaming of the 1980s was only seldom televised (Kerttula 2019b), seeing video gaming on television was a spectacle itself and was a great way of marketing new video games and arcade machines. Research on broadcasted sports seemed to apply to the early television shows discussed in this study. As Garry Whannel and Paul Dwyer (2009 & 2019) noted, 1970s broadcasting technology allowed the producers to create more efficient sports spectacles (Whannel 2009, 208; Dwyer 2019, 143). This also made artistic choices in the production possible, as dramatizing the events made “capturing the moment” easier (Morris & Nydahl 1985). The choices in lighting and image played a crucial role in creating drama (Gruneau 1989, 134–135). Although these visually spectacular tricks slowly started to appear in the 1950s and 1960s, the action replay being the most influential one, not all progress was based on technology. One of the most important creations that affect the sports spectacle was introduced in 1966 - the commentators (Kolamo 2014, 67). With commentary and visual tricks, such as the ability to show computer graphics as an overlay to the action, or to divide the image into several different segments, the creation of dramatic sports spectacle was an inevitability.

At the center of the sports spectacle is the athlete, which brings us to the discussion of celebrity as a part of the *Let's Play* spectacle, or as Debord (1969, Thesis 60) sees it, “spectacular representation of a living human being”. In this part, Debord sees celebrity and star statuses as individual and personal images within the complete image of the spectacle. Citing Neil Gabler (1998, 4), Douglas Kellner discusses the self and the celebrity status through making mediated life a media spectacle in itself. This also means that the celebrity status can also fall and disappear due to negative publicity (Kellner 2003, 4–5). This is an important reminder regarding the professional and amateur statuses of online celebrities today.

Many player-narrators seem to do the videos as a hobby, although there are many professionals among the hobbyists. Distinguishing the amateur producers from the professional one can be a difficult task. The easiest method of differentiating professional YouYubers from amateur hobbyists seems to be the

number of subscribers and viewers seen in the video. As Hector Postigo (2016) has noted, even though there are several different ways for a YouTuber to create revenue, the most distinct one was the number of subscribers, as through commercials a larger portion of the revenue goes to YouTube over the creator (Postigo 2016, 337-340). Along with the number of subscribers and views, one way to differentiate professionals and amateur producers from each other is the commercial aspect seen in the video. In many videos the producers promote different products in separate advertisements or by product placement.

The world of eSports works quite differently in this sense. In contemporary professional competitive gaming, the players make their profits from athletic success, winning events, earning a monthly wage, and through sponsorships (Kaytoue et. al. 2012, 1181). This differs from the revenue logic of Let's Playing, speedrunning and online streaming where most of the personal revenue comes from advertisements and viewer ratings (Postigo 2016, *ibid*; Johnson & Woodcock 2019, 819-820). Because of this, being a professional eSports athlete is different by nature from, for example, being a professional speedrun streamer.

It is important to note that the world of sports heavily influenced the early presentations of video gaming (Borowy & Jin 2013, 2261). All the aforementioned tricks were already present in the early video gaming television shows, especially *That's Incredible* and *Incredible Sunday*. From a certain point of view, it is also possible to regard the commentators from *The Incredible Marble Machine* and *Starcade* as predecessors to the sports commentators, but in the context of video games. Because of this, the concept of the spectacle - used in the way I've used it in this study - is applicable. Even though the different elements of the spectacle, especially the nationalization, are more evident in modern eSports, the traces can be found also from earlier material.

The emergence and popularity of online videos resulted in television shows needing to find new methods to appeal to an audience that was watching YouTube and online streams instead of broadcast television (Porter & Golan 2006; Kjus 2009). There is a difference between a presentation and a representation. A presentation is something, that presents occurring things. In a representation, in the image there have been made choices in what to present or not, which in turn leads to the representation giving different meaning to the image (e.g., Pynnönen 2013, 17-18). Through different means of these representations, the image on screen portrays a supposed reality (Darley 2001, 16-18). As there might be some scripting behind the presentation, making the real an illusion, I refer to this image as a supposed real. This is also because of the means of visual media spectacle; the scripting could be hard to differentiate from non-scripted reality action. Even more, cinema and television rely on making the image look real or at least "real enough", even though the image might be situated in a fantasy world. As an example, Ian Bogost (2007) writes about the fantasy sport called "quidditch" and how it is represented in the Harry Potter books, movies and video games. Bogost points out how, even though the sport might seem plausible in the books and in the movies, in the video games it becomes clear that the rules of the sport are somewhat broken, though the sport has been influenced by a number of real-

world sports (Bogost 2007, 178-179). As I do not study any particular video game throughout this dissertation, I keep the focus regarding the supposed real then in the presentations of video game play.

As Geoff King (2005) has mentioned, whereas Hollywood movie spectacles aim to create a visual spectacle that seems to be real, in reality television the supposed reality is a spectacle in itself (King 2005, 13). Kellner (ibid.) also discusses the reality television shows, stating how they are profoundly both voyeuristic and narcissistic experiences and by creating this supposed reality, also draw people into these shows as participants (Kellner 2003, 17-20). In a sense, this connects to the aforementioned sports spectacles, in which the awe and purpose of the broadcast is to see something unfold in real time. However, the spectacle of the real can also be seen in news broadcasts, in which especially the coverage of the catastrophic events of the world are brought to audience in a spectacular fashion (Rodney 2005, 37-45). Kellner (ibid.), citing Jean Baudrillard (1983), sees this as a part of a time we are living in, a time of a certain simulation, where the boundaries between reality and fake can be hard to see (Kellner 2003, 22).

In Chapter 3, I discuss this assumed real in multiple occasions, which is why my take on the real in spectacles should be evaluated further. According to Debord (1967, thesis 4 & 8), spectacles create reality by mediating social relations, while at the same time the spectacles themselves are real. I understand this as a construct where the aim of the spectacle is to create an image which can be perceived as real.

Regarding video games in this context, they can be seen as a mixture of fictional worlds and real-world rules (see Juul 2005) or, for example, an illustration of something we feel is real or real enough (Hong 2015, 36-37). Because this supposed real is projected to the audience as an image where a select person is playing the game, I use the concepts of self-presentation, representation and performance throughout my study to convey my views of this supposed real. These concepts have been used in video game studies in many ways, such as in referring to the representation of gender and age in video games (see Burgess, Stermer & Burgess 2007; Williams et.al. 2009; Malkowski & Russworm 2017), culture and religion (see Sisler 2008; Campbell & Grieve 2014) and genres such as fantasy and science fiction (e.g. Schwarz 2006).

I look at the presentation of video game play as a part of a phenomenon of Let's Playing and other live-action footage of video gaming¹⁴, while not focusing on analyzing specific games or specific features or themes within the games, such as the game characters or different themes of sexuality. The small exception to this is the game story, which I do refer to in the first article. However, I exclude explicit mentions of the representation of the original story in the game, as the story of the player-narrator overlaps it. As a whole, this study looks at the different ways playing video games and the action of video game play presented in a spectacular fashion. This excludes the video game play per se from the study.

¹⁴ I am specifically referring to video games in this research, excluding e.g. digitalized board games or games as a whole.

In general, I am referring to video games as both objects and activity. In the context of representation, video games themselves are therefore a vessel of creation, narration and presentation. Video games are the subject of the live-action presentation explored in my research, from which the representation of *playing* a video game emerges. Had I concentrated my study on longplays¹⁵, the concept of representation would stay here; they represent only the recorded video game footage and nothing else (see e.g. Bolt 2004, 15–16).

However, let us build this definition a little further. Even from the earliest examples from my research material, the *Let's Plays* of the *Phantasmagoria*-games, it is clear that there is more to the picture. The video game is there alongside the imagery of the player-narrator, overlay graphics, and, in some cases, the audience and the environment the games are played at. These elements are paradigms of their own and have different ways of creating meanings. For example, the video game presented in the footage observed belongs to the paradigm group of video games and has meanings already without connecting it to the other elements found on the screen. As the chosen paradigms are put together, they form syntagm, which again creates new meanings from the group of paradigms inside it (Fiske 1992, 81–83). This syntagm is the image I am referring to in this research. There is only one thing to add to the image: the actual performance of playing a video game.

As an example, I am comparing and researching the eSports-presentation in online streams and television in one of my articles in juxtaposition with the presentation of traditional sports in broadcasting. From there, I approach the concept of eSports through the representation of the activity and the video game played. Regarding eSports, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) suggest a definition of eSports that addresses how traditional sports happen, and are measured, in the “real world”, whereas in eSports the activity happens in a “virtual world”, even though the players/athletes are active in the real world (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017, 213). With their gameplay, the digital athletes also perform certain strategies and play styles of the game that are then available to use for other players in competitive means (Egliston 2015, 7–11). In my other articles, there are variables to the activity: in *Let's Plays*, for instance, the activity includes narrating the gameplay while also playing. The television shows have various ways of depicting the act of play, as the formats are not unified, and each has their own purposes of showing video game activity.

These presentations create new meanings, or rather connotations that differ from other kinds of connotations linked to video game representation. As Roland Barthes (1984) has written about connotations, they are closely tied to the culture and include symbolism, which the audience interprets from their own cultural perspective (Barthes 1984, 122–130). In this case, the connotations that these representations convey connect to the performance of playing a video game, and while watching some games that are featured in the live-action presentations might convey their own connotations to the audience, the performance is, in my point of view, the image that creates new meanings.

¹⁵ See ch. 2.5.3.

I also note that, regarding this study, I am not developing this concept further. This is because studying the representations would make for a complete study of its own. If I took it further, it would raise more questions, such as whether the YouTube-videos recorded of the older shows are actually representations of the original show or, in this case, even representations of representations. These questions would complicate the study in unnecessary ways and are therefore best left for future studies.

2.2 Research data and the methodical triangulation

In the articles regarding television shows, I conducted my analysis by comparing different research material with each other and against literature. The research material consisted of the collected database, visual material found from YouTube and other sources across various websites with information about the shows. The aim was to create a timeline of the television shows with qualitative methods and then to look more closely at the style and genre of the shows for the narrative part.

Determining which Let's Plays to use in my research was a difficult task, as the sheer amount of possible material online is so vast that pinpointing the examples that could contribute to the study would take an extremely long time. Therefore, I referred to Let's Plays I already knew and started searching for suitable counterparts. The Let's Plays used in the research are *Let's Play Phantasmagoria 2* by Noah Antwiler (aka. The Spooky One), *Let's Play PHANTASMAGORRRRIA!!!* by Reg Franklin (aka. *Ensign Ricky*) and two videos from Mikko Heinonen, *Pelataanpa: Kuusnepamuistoja* and *Pelataanpa: Dreamcast-muistoja*. As mentioned in the introduction, Antwiler's *Phantasmagoria* was probably the first Let's Play I ever saw all the way through. Because of this, I knew that Antwiler covers both endings (the good and the bad one) of *Phantasmagoria 2*. Therefore, this Let's Play would be suitable for analysis, as the whole game is covered in the narration. Antwiler narrates the Let's Play as his character The Spooky One, even though he occasionally refers to his personal life in the monologue. The Let's Play is nearly five hours long, which meant that the number of transcribed lines was also vast. Originally, Antwiler released the Let's Play in shorter episodes, because of the 15-minute time limit of YouTube in 2008. Later, Spooky combined the episodes into five separate hour-long videos, which made the transcribing easier.

As for the oral history of Let's Plays, I already knew that Mikko Heinonen's *Pelataanpa*-series was focused on historical context and self-reflection towards the games played. In many of the videos I had watched, Heinonen played games from his own childhood and youth, which made the choice obvious. What was not obvious, though, was to determine exactly which videos to use.

There are a number of other Let's Plays, which feature the same kind of oral history narrative as the *Pelataanpa*-videos do. One of the most notable series of this kind is *James and Mike Mondays* by James Rolfe (aka. The Angry Video Game

Nerd) and Mike Matei. These videos differ greatly from the AVGN-episodes. As with Pelataanpa, James and Mike Mondays feature old games that the narrators reflect on while playing. There are memories from the era when the game came out, comparisons to other video games and movies, and some reflections from the narrators as players and video game enthusiasts. The character of the Angry Video Game Nerd is not present in these videos, even though they refer to the show every now and then if a reason to reference it comes up. These videos serve as examples of the clear difference between scripted and acted videos and the freely narrated vlog-type videos.

One important factor in the triangulation was the data collected about the television shows that featured video games. The process of this data collection began during winter 2018, and for the purpose of the dissertation was concluded during autumn 2019. By that time, the dataset consisted of roughly 180 different television shows from 29 countries around the world. The countries represented in the data are from all continents, even though the number of Asian and African countries is notably smaller than the number of countries from, for example, Europe. Figure 1 shows a small portion of the dataset and the way I laid it out in the complete version:

Name of the program	Years running	Tags_1	Tags_2	Country of Origin
The Magnificent Marble Machine	1975-1976	Gameshow	Trivia, Competitive	The United States
Tv Powwww!	1978-1990	Participatory, Gam	Competitive, Play-by-phon	The United States
Alpha 5	1981-1985	Gameshow	Esports, Competitive	West Germany
Starcade	1982-1984	Gameshow	Trivia, Competitive	The United States
Mi és a Számítógép	1983-1983	Infotainment	Features	Hungary
That's Incredible (Special episode)	1983-1983	Lifestyle, Reality	Competitive, Esports, Event	The United States
Computer Corner	1983-1988	Magazine, Lifestyle	Features	West Germany
The Video Game	1984-1985	Gameshow, Realit	Trivia, Minigames, Competi	The United States
First Class	1984-1988	Gameshow	Competitive, Trivia, Team	Great Britain
Famiko Daisakusen (ファミっ子大戦略)	1986-1988	Gameshow	Competitive, Team	Japan
Incredible Sunday (Special Episode)	1988-1988	Lifestyle, Reality	Competitive, Esports	The United States
oSWald	1988-1989	Gameshow, Partic	Competitive, Play-by-phon	Denmark
Famiko Dai Shuugou (ファミっ子大集合)	1988-1991	Gameshow	Competitive, Team	Japan
Highscore	1988-1991	Magazine	Reviews, Features	West Germany
Ponto por Ponto	1988-1994	Magazine	Reviews	Portugal
Makoto Otake is now in PC Land (大竹まこと)	1989-1992	Lifestyle, Reality	Narrative	Japan
Trolspejlet	1989-current	Magazine	Reviews, News	Denmark
Super oSWald	1989-1990	Gameshow, Partic	Competitive, Play-by-phon	Denmark
GamePro TV	1990-1991	Magazine	Reviews, Hints	The United States
Video Power	1990-1992	Magazine, Gamesh	Hints, Competitive, Trivia	The United States
Elektor Kalandor	1990-1993	Participatory	Play-by-phone	Hungary
(Le Club) Les Branchés	1990-1993	Gameshow	Competitive, Team	Canada

Figure 1: Excerpt from the television show data

I collected this data using various techniques. Most of the shows I found using a simple Google search, with the assistance of Wikipedia and the references from there. After finding a show with this method, I started doing searches that were more specific and looking for possible literature and research about the shows. In this way, I found online discussions and, in some cases, even official marketing material about the shows, which helped better determine the style of each show. In the case of foreign shows in a language I do not speak, I used several different Google Translate search strings to get enough different results. The combination of these results abled the confirmation of the data, as the search strings each led

to different sources. Some shows I found through my foreign colleagues, with whom I discussed the data. In most cases, this proved to be an efficient data collecting method. Several different websites had articles about the shows in the more specific searches, and even video material was surprisingly easily available. At the same time, it became evident that many of these shows have disappeared completely and that information of them is very hard to find. This was the case with the shows from Israel, for example.

I am using comparative analysis as a part of my narrative analysis as well. By collecting quantitative data (see Figures 2-4) about the number of different narrative elements throughout the two Let's Plays examined, I was able to see how the number of different elements varied in the narrative from beginning to end. As some elements were more dominant in the beginning of the Let's Play, the same elements were not found as often in the later parts. This comparison showed that the narrative structure of a Let's Play varies in regard to player experience and the progression of the player story that is written upon the game. Regarding the study of sports and video game spectacles, it was necessary to compare many different sources and theories to help build an image of these spectacles. Along with the qualitative research on spectacles and the shows themselves, I also compared my findings with coeval quantitative data.

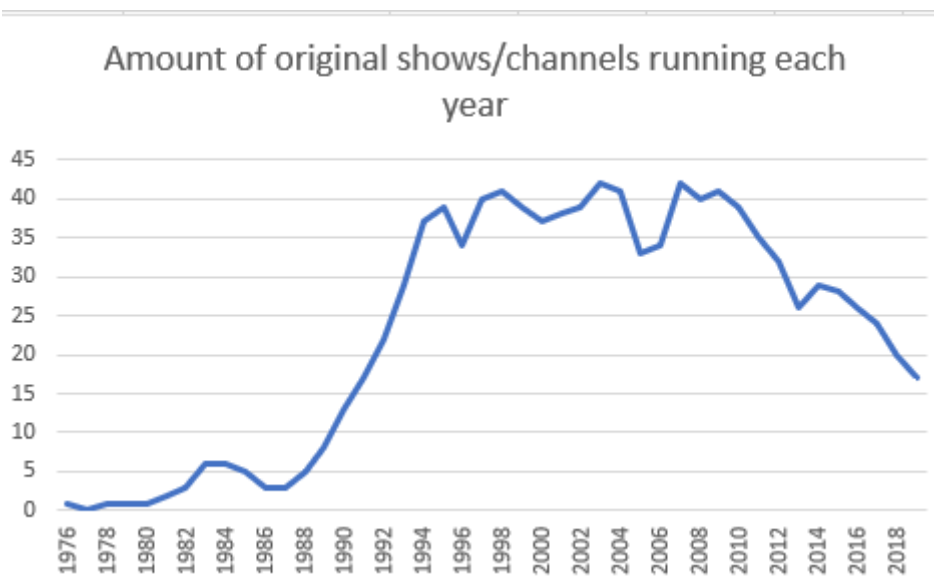


Figure 2: The timeline of the television shows on air

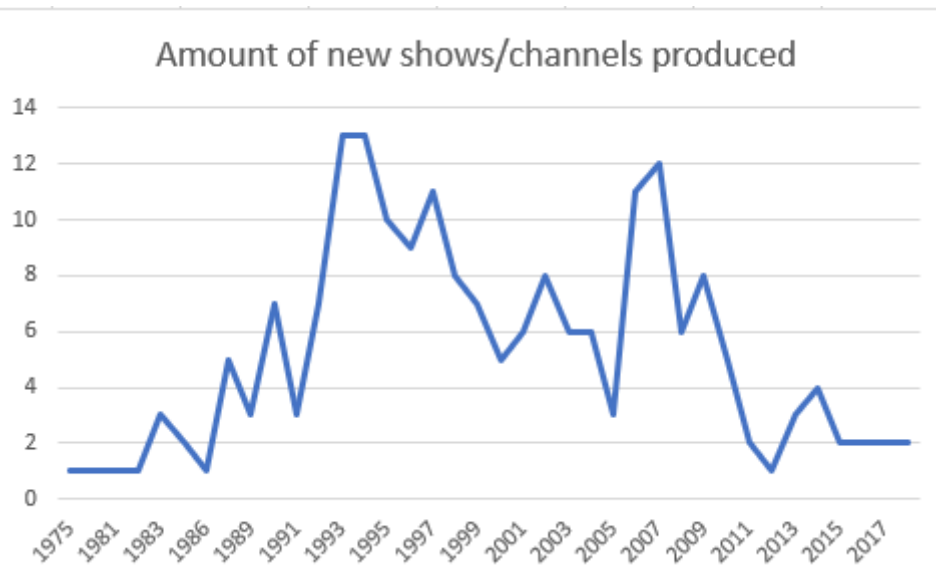


Figure 3: The timeline of new shows/channels produced

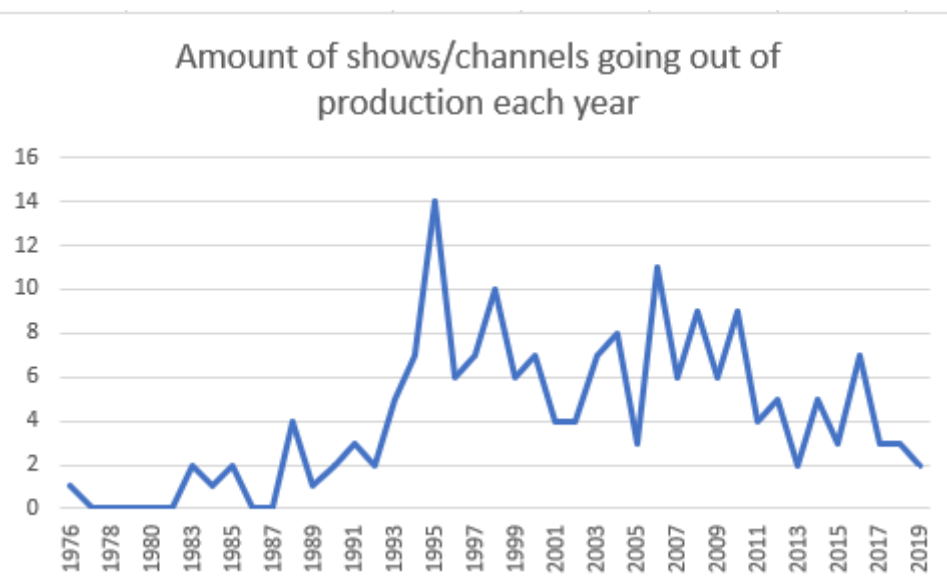


Figure 4: The timeline of shows/channels going out of production

These graphs show how many different shows and dedicated television channels have been running for each year on the timeline, as well as how many new shows were produced each year and the number of shows that went out of production during each year. As can be seen here, the shows peaked in popularity in the early 1990s but have been slowly disappearing as the timeline approaches the present. Additionally, it is notable that the number of new shows and channels produced was at its highest in 1993 and 1994. After that, the number steadies down until 2010, when the number declines to almost as low as in the 1980s. From the last graph, it is clear that the mid-1990s was also a time for shorter running

shows, as many of the shows from between 1992 and 1996 ran for only a year or two.

The two episodes featured in my last article were picked from the television show dataset. Regarding the whole data, these episodes stood out as different and original comparing to the rest of the data, which made the choice easy. With the connections to the Twin Galaxies arcade and The U.S. National Video Game Team, these episodes also have a remarkable historical weight, as they look at the evolution of competitive video gaming.

When looking at the scope of this dissertation, the research results come from combining the individual results from across the different articles together. This kind of method can be described as a form of methodical triangulation (e.g. Denzin 1970, Jick 1978, 602–608, Flick 1992 & Jonkman 1991), especially because the research methods in each of the articles vary.

Methodical and data triangulation in the same vein as in my research has previously been used in the research of how digitalization has changed the field of consuming sports as a media (Turtiainen 2012) and Finnish video game consumption in the late 1980s, as examined through the video game magazines and oral history of gamers (Suominen 2015). In his blog posts, Suominen explains how data triangulation seems to be a useful technique to apply in article dissertations, as the articles might involve different methods, data and research angles from each other, even when focusing on the same subject. However, Suominen also warns that this method might lead the author to pursue too many different angles and subjects, which could end up making the original research subject too broad and vague (Suominen 2010b).

In this dissertation, the data triangulation was fixed to look at a specific phenomenon: the spectacle and representation of video game play in live-action media. The different sources concerning the research questions were all focused on the research subject, even though the sources were varied by nature. While I do acknowledge that the number of different sources used in the study varies, they were all used to shed light on the research questions. For example, through the quantitative data, the events in history provided in the qualitative data and coeval material become easier to understand. Some researchers, such as Ashatu Hussein (2009), have endorsed this kind of approach towards triangulation. Therefore, the purpose of using quantitative data is to complement the qualitative analysis and to find more conclusive evidence for the results of the qualitative studies (Hussein 2009, 7–8).

However, each of the articles provide results of their own, which I am comparing to each other for the purpose of my research questions. I could also be talking about data triangulation as my method. There has also been discussion around whether this kind of methodology should be called mixed methods or triangulation. The differences between the two can seem quite trivial, and as Virginia Wilson (2014) notes:

“...it seems as though triangulation is just another term for mixed-methods research.” (Wilson 2014, 74).

For the purpose of this study, this discussion seems irrelevant, but I acknowledge that it exists. The angles around this discussion are varied (see Mertens & Hesse-Biber 2012; Heale & Forbes 2013) and there are seemingly no conclusive answers to the questions raised by this discussion. In addition, from a certain angle the my approach could also be dubbed causal explanation (see Woodward 2015). Through the research material it is possible to see some causalities between the events discussed in this dissertation, mainly the reasons behind the television shows disappearing and the online content appearing. Even though some causalities do stand out from the research results, I am not explicitly analyzing or explaining them. In the context of this discussion, referring to my approach as methodical and data triangulation is the most suitable solution. In the next chapters, I will talk about these different methods in my article in depth.

2.2.1 Narrative analysis and narrativization

I approached the study with a variety of different narrative analysis methods. To conduct the analysis, I transcribed the Let's Plays into text format to see the structure and elements of the narration. It was imperative to see which kind of narrative patterns were repeated throughout the narration and identify them to see how the player-narrators altered the narration while playing.

As my first approach, I started identifying different narrative elements from Let's Plays. This was necessary as traditional methods of story analysis, such as Campbell's "hero's journey" (Campbell 2008) or Syd Field's "three-act model" (Field 2008) were not capable of explaining the varying and spontaneous narrative of a Let's Play. This is because even though the core material (the games) is interpretable through them, the layer of player narrative was different and left many questions (Kerttula 2019a, 242).

To evaluate this further: Gabriel Menotti and Rene Glas write about Let's Play from the viewpoint of machinima and film. According to Menotti, the performance emerges from immediate storytelling linked with the gameplay. Because of this, analyzing Let's Plays with the same narrative methods as with machinima is not possible, as the story shifts, moves and comes to completion as the player-narrator advances in the game (Menotti 2014, 84–89). Glas builds on Menotti's views and argues that the presence of the player-narrator affects the narrative and makes it very different from all forms of machinima (Glas 2015, 82–83). In addition, if we look at video games as a narrative media, they differ quite a lot from movies and literature. Even if the game is open-ended, the writers need to make the players go through important story pieces (DeMarle 2007, 72–74). This also takes us back to the discussion of video games as a media and the debate between ludology and narratology (e.g. Aarseth 2012, 130). Regarding this study, I look at video games as means of creating a new story, while not discussing the stories in the games themselves. With this, both the ludic and the narrative aspects of the games are not in the focus of this research.

In video games, the storyline is usually linear, even if the player's choices and free search for story elements lead to alternative storylines, giving the player an illusion of a storyline different from a typical story with a beginning, middle

and end (Iuppa & Borst 2007, 224). When games need to move the story forward without players' intrusion, the usual way of doing this is via cutscenes. These cutscenes need to keep the story intact by intertwining the gameplay and the non-interactive parts (Aarseth 2004, 362).

Because of the different styles on narration and the focus that is put more on the player-narrator than the game, it was necessary to analyze the Let's Plays in question through the lens of narrativization to see which narrative elements contribute to the form of a Let's Play. According to Hayden White and Monika Fludernik, through narrativization the original material turns into a story, which puts the source material into a new cultural and narrative perspective and makes it more understandable (White 1987, 1-25; Fludernik 1987, 31-35). This can also be called storification rather than narrativization, as the narration gives the source material a completely new story. This happens because the source material becomes subordinate to the narration (Tammi 1992, 13). In this sense, the source game becomes an object of storification.

The elements derive from Catherine Kohler Riessman's (2008) seven functions that a narrative can have, introduced in her book *Narrative Methods for Human Sciences*. These functions are remembering the past, arguing with the story, persuading the audience, engaging the audience, entertainment, misleading the audience and mobilizing others into action. (Riessman 2008, 8-9). Through this framework, it was possible to conduct an analysis of the narratives in the Let's Plays and to identify the seven key elements of a Let's Play narrative. The elements identified, with supporting literature from the two different Let's Plays, were:

- Descriptive narration, where the narrator describes the visuals of the gameworld and, for example, the motives and background of the narrator regarding the game.
- Story narration, which gives the audience more insight into the original story of the game.
- Audiovisual narration, which comments on the sounds and aesthetics of the game.
- Game-mechanics narration, which comments on the playability and the interface of the game.
- Intertextuality, which connects the game and the player-narrator's story with other media.
- Reflective narration, which reflects the supposed audience and the player-narrator himself.
- Alternative narration, which storifies the action of playing the game, providing the game narrative with new meanings and, in some cases, altering the personality of non-player characters.

These elements were evident from the data and are further supported by Sari Piittinen's doctoral dissertation (Piittinen 2018, 52-53). In addition, various other sources support the elements found. Descriptive narration, story narration and

audiovisual narration follow Riessman's functions of arguing, persuasion and engaging, as these functions are closely related to narrating the story and engaging the audience to a story that is different than the original (Riessman 2008, 8-9). Salen and Zimmerman's theory of the space of possibility relates to game-mechanics narration, as the player-narrator makes obvious to the audience the possibilities the game world has (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67). The concept of intertextuality - how various references connect the material to other text - is supported by Julian Kücklich's view of intertextuality in digital gaming. As Kücklich states, understanding the different connections between the texts and media can deepen one's understanding of the culture where the product has originated. (Kücklich 2006, 105-107). Intertextuality in Let's Plays deepen this understanding even further, as through commentary some intertextual references are presented to the audience explicitly. Additionally, the player-narrators make their own intertextual references throughout the narration, connecting the game and the Let's Play to an even larger network of referable material (Kerttula 2019a, 246-247). This type of intertextual narrative has been present in video game culture for a long time, including in video game reviews (Suominen 2010, 84).

When considering different reflectivities, the supporting studies are not mainly from the circle of game studies, but also from social media and narrative studies. Reflective narration is inspired by Michael Strangelove's (2010) studies on YouTube diaries, their online self-presentation, self-reflection, and how they reflect with the audience (Strangelove 2010, 74-77). Strangelove's views of how different online video bloggers present themselves and reflect with the audience has many similarities with the style of reflectivity found in Let's Plays, as the recorded video gaming with narration is, when looked at more broadly, a form of online video blogging. However, as the reflective narration in Let's Plays usually takes an audience into account, they are different from vlogs, which, according to Michael Wesch, are introspective and continuous monologues (Wesch 2010, 26). Under reflective narration we find self-reflection, which follows Anthony Paul Kerby's (1991) views of self-narration regarding Paul Ricoeur's (1985) work on history and narrative (Ricoeur 1985, 213-214; Kerby 1991, 39-42). The reflection of self is an important concept here; as both Kerby and Ricoeur have noted, telling one's own stories gives the narrator an identity. However, many YouTubers are taking a role other than their own when recording the videos, as exemplified by Noah Antwiler's blog posts, in which he writes about getting fired from his job, having different health problems and difficulties in his relationships. These blog posts have now become obscure, as the original website, *The Spooky Experiment*, was taken down during the year 2019. When self-reflecting, however, the player-narrators move out of their role and act as their own self. Because of this, Wesch's definition of vlogging as a continuous monologue does not apply to Let's Plays, as the narration is not continuous, and the player-narrator can shift between different roles during the story.

Through this comes perhaps the most peculiar and original type of narrative elements in Let's Plays, alternative narration (Kerttula 2019a, 249-251).

This element changes the story of the game completely, moving it in another direction. By narrating story scenes of the game differently, giving new personalities to non-player characters and/or having a dialogue between the player-narrator and the game characters, alternative narration is the element that stands out the most in Let's Plays, feeling like something akin to movie riffing. In movie riffing, the narrator or narrators comment on the movie on top of the original audio track, providing the movie with a critical and in many cases satirical narrative (see Weiner & Barba 2011; Clewis 2014).

In Let's Plays, the riffing varies more because there are more elements to riff on. In addition, an important difference is that the narrator – or “riffer” – is an active character throughout the narration, rather than a passive viewer. Through these different elements, it is possible to see that the player-narrator is commenting not only on the source material, but also on himself and the way the player-narrator is interacting with both the game and the culture surrounding the source material. The tone of a Let's Play can differ according to whether the Let's Player has played the game before or not. The difference is notable not only in the standard narrative, but also in the visual aspects of the video. For example, in the Let's Play Archive, user ThornBrain's Let's Play of *007: Agent Under Fire*, we can clearly see that the narrator is accustomed to the set-pieces of the game-world. He does not spend time wandering around and trying out different things, but instead runs through the game quickly while explaining the mechanics verbally. He knows how the enemies act, he knows where the key-elements to completing a level are, and he knows his way around the secrets and puzzles. He also constantly refers to hidden secrets throughout the game, which he has already found in previous playthroughs.

Gabriel Menotti argues that there are many similarities between all types of recorded video gaming (Menotti 2014). However, the narrative style of Let's Plays differentiates them from the other types of videos (Kerttula 2019b). As the narration of a Let's Play is often spontaneous and has not been scripted beforehand (Kerttula 2017), the audience that the videos try to appeal to is different. Compared to television shows, which try to appeal to as many viewers as possible (Ha 2018), a Let's Play builds the narration to appeal to people interested in the game being played, as well as those interested in the performance of play and the narrator.

This theoretical framework of the different narrative elements will lend itself to different kinds of research on Let's Plays. However, it still needs more applications to be completely verified. The framework should be used with more Let's Plays, and especially with different kinds of videos, to see if these narrative elements can really be applied to all styles of Let's Plays. It is especially important to work out if there could be even more elements to add to this framework, as the original analysis was conducted using only a limited number of different Let's Plays.

Continuing the study from the narrative analysis, I wanted to see how the player-narrators history and experience in gaming affected the narrative and whether Let's Plays could be used as material for video game preservation, as

Niklas Nylund has suggested (Nylund 2015, *ibid.*). I set out to see if the narratives of these videos also create an oral history where the narrator reflects the game against his or her own history and experiences with it. The methodology for this involved combining the narrative analysis from the earlier study and a new analysis of the oral history produced by the player-narrators in these videos. The choice of oral history was obvious for the research, as according to Kirsti Salmi-Niklander (2006), oral history discusses important events in the life of one individual or community and is by nature usually quite long-term in scale (Salmi-Niklander 2006, 199-200). This way oral history gives an insight into the life, identity and personal cultural history of one individual (Passerini 1988, 53-60). As oral history usually connects to the surrounding world of the narrator, it then brings in the dimension of the community to complement the story (Portelli 2006, 35). Through the community and the memories of the coeval world, oral history links to the social memory of the narrator (Korkiakangas 2006, 57).

2.2.2 Convergence and transmedia storytelling

Another concept that appears throughout my research articles is media convergence. American media scholar, professor Henry Jenkins made this concept popular in his 2006 book *“Convergence Culture”*, where Jenkins built upon Ithiel de Sola Pool’s definition of convergence as a blurring of the lines between the technological and the modal, combining different types of media together. Jenkins brings this definition to the contemporary age, mentioning how the convergence in media is more than just a device combining different older devices together, such as camera, phone and music player (Pool 1983; Jenkins 2006, 10-16). In a contemporary light, these technological convergences did happen: for example modern mobile devices have become much more than just communication devices.

As people use video game material to create completely new content, the activity is transmedial in terms of storytelling (see Scolari 2009 & 2013; Jenkins 2010), or, in French situationist terms, manifests *détournement* (Barnabé 2019, 2-3). Kris Ligan sees the definition of convergence as essential to the existence of the whole Let’s Play phenomenon, as Let’s Plays *“redefine how media is engaged”* (Ligan 2011, 11). When looking at the videos more closely and from the viewpoint of intertextuality, it becomes obvious that convergence is much more than just a technological come-together. As the creators of machinima, Let’s Players, eSports athletes and many others use video game content to create something completely different, the video game becomes a media product among many others in the combination of this new creation. There is a mixture of music, movies, literature and others in a Let’s Play video, which are used to create new meanings, differing from the original source material. As movie rippers bring the element of film criticism and comedy to the original story and footage, Let’s Players bring their own selves, along with their experiences and backgrounds. The references to other media material, such as music, have a place in the narrators’ own earlier experiences and life, which also eventually affects the narrative of the Let’s Play.

It is noteworthy that convergence also applies to the television shows discussed above. In these shows, the video games are used to create television entertainment, under the rules and framework of television culture. As video games are a cultural product of their own, the convergence in the television shows affected the growth of video game culture and brought their own pieces to the cultural puzzle of video games. At the same time, these television shows are cultural products of their own and even though the video games are used as vessels or tools to create these shows, they still remain a part of the culture of the television. In this way, both the shows and the video games have, from my perspective, contributed to the cultural frameworks of one another.

3 VIDEO GAMES IN LIVE-ACTION MEDIA

As my research focuses mainly on Let's Plays and television shows, the differences between them, and other types of representations featured and discussed in my articles, are important. Therefore, in this section, I will describe the characteristics of each phenomenon, present the research relevant to my study on these subjects, and position my own research in the field, while also clarifying the distinctions between different representation types to avoid confusion.

In terms of this dissertation, the concept of live-action is used to describe recorded footage of video gaming in media, as in opposition to printed video game journalism. Under this concept, we have television shows and more current YouTube-videos and while the concept can also refer to for example theatrical productions and role-playing, these forms of live-action art and action are not referred to in this dissertation.

Contrary to the order of the articles published, I will feature the types of live-action footage in a chronological order to establish a historical timeline of the events. The timeline starts with the early television shows and continues with the emergence of eSports and competitive gaming. The final part of the timeline are the Let's Plays and other contemporary amateur online productions. Live-action, in the context of this research, means productions featuring people playing and narrating video games in different forms of video footage. The analysis excludes modern live streaming of video games, as the research focuses on recorded footage. Live streaming is a phenomenon of its own and while I do acknowledge, that this evolution of live-action footage of video gaming also contributes to the streaming through services such as Twitch.tv, but that sort of live streaming does not fall under the focus of my research, as I concentrate more on previously recorded and edited material.

It is also noteworthy that because of the evolutions of the narrativization of gaming, I also need to refer to traditional video game journalism briefly. While video game magazines have been around longer than the television shows featured in this research, I will only refer to magazines that contribute to the legacy of narrating video game play. I will also refer briefly to the relationship




between said video game journalism and written Let's Plays, as these forms of narrating video game play contributed significantly to the emergence of the phenomenon of recording oneself as a player-narrator in online videos.




3.1 Early competitive gaming and television broadcasts

The pre-history of modern eSports goes back to competitive video game tournaments as early as the 1970s and 1980s. Probably the first event that can be considered to be an ancestor of modern eSports were the 1972 Spacewar Olympics held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California (Taylor 2012, 3-4; Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018, 6-7). The years after that saw the first steps towards institutionalizing competitive gaming, with the Twin Galaxies arcade and the *primus motor* of said arcade, Walter Day. The competition in the arcade focused on the Twin Galaxies International Scoreboard, which held both records made within the arcade and records people achieved in other arcades. The records from other arcades were validated by a picture or a VHS-video a person could send to Twin Galaxies for validation. Twin Galaxies was also involved in many different PR-events, such as the first televised video game tournaments and magazine coverage (Taylor 2012, 2-6, Kocurek 2015, 37-58; Kerttula 2019c, 2-4).

There were also traces of early institutionalization of competitive video gaming with the emergence of The U.S. National Video Game Team, founded by Walter Day and Jim Riley in 1983. The team can be considered as one of the first eSports teams, even though the main objective of the team was to promote video games and events. The team was not in fact an official national team, but instead the name was given to the team to help promote Riley's *Electronic Circus* -tour and the first self-titled "Superstars" of video gaming in the advertising of said tour. These first video gaming celebrities in The United States were Eric Ginner, Bill Mitchell, Todd Walker and Darren Olson. *Electronic Circus* failed to gain success, but the team and the name lived on after that (see Patterson 2017). Figure 5 also reveals that, along the U.S. National Video Game Team, there were also state teams in video gaming: in this case the state team of Southern California. There is sadly very little documentation available of these state teams, but according to a blog post by Keith Smith (2013), there were allegedly teams from at least Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Nebraska, Idaho, Washington and Northern California/Northern Nevada (Smith 2013).

North American Video Game Challenge
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DIVISION


TOURNAMENT DATES

QUALIFYING – August 22, 23, 24, 25, & 26 (Noon – 6 P.M.)

FINALS – Saturday, August 27 & Sunday, August 28.

OFFICIAL TOURNAMENT SITE –
STARSHIP VIDEO
1238 W. FOOTHILL BLVD.
UPLAND, CA 91786

TELEPHONE – (714) 946-7855



QUALIFYING INFORMATION

QUALIFYING – The overall best 10 players will be chosen for the **State Team of Southern California** and will advance to the Finals.

U.S. FINALS – The State Team of Southern California will compete against State Teams from the other 50 States, Canada and Northern California. The overall best 10 players in the Finals will be chosen for the **U.S. National Video Game Team**.

INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE – The National Team is expected to face Foreign Teams in an International Challenge at the end of 1983.

REGISTRATION AND FEE INFORMATION

FEE – \$5.00 per Entrant (includes all tournament games).

DEADLINE BY MAIL – Monday, August 22 (with \$5.00 check or money order).

DEADLINE IN PERSON – Any Qualifying Date listed above (Noon - 6 P.M.)

TROPHY – Each player selected for the State Team will receive a N.A.V.G.C. T-shirt and Trophy with their U.S. Ranking.

THIS TOURNAMENT IS ORGANIZED BY THE TWIN GALAXIES INTERNATIONAL
SCOREBOARD IN OTTUMWA, IA.

Figure 5: Excerpt from a poster advertising the 1982 North American Video Game Challenge (Image: The U.S. National Video Game Team Image Archive)

The television shows played a remarkable part in popularizing competitive video gaming from the early 1980s through the 2000s. The first example of such a show is NBC's *The Magnificent Marble Machine* (The United States/NBC 1975-1976). The idea of the show was to answer questions provided by the host of the show, after which the winner of the quiz got to play with an enormous pinball machine for the prizes. Even though the show did not feature an actual video game or a pinball machine that the audience could play at an arcade or buy from the stores, the concept of combining quiz sections and arcade-like gameplay was the foundation for many of the shows in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The earliest show that focused entirely on competition was *Alpha 5* (West Germany/ARD 1981-1985), which had video game tournaments featuring student teams and was carried out with a ladder-like tournament system. The show did not use any existing video game software, as the games were

specifically programmed for the use of an Apple II computer on the show. The games were simple arcade games, played either one player against the other, or by taking turns trying to get a high score. The teams chose one player from their ranks to compete in each game, after which the player could not play another game in the episode.

Probably the most famous show of this kind was *Starcade* (The United States/JM Production 1982-1984), which also featured gameplay with arcade cabinets and quizzes. The gameplay in the shows was competitive, usually featuring two or more players playing against each other for prizes. What made *Starcade* important compared to *The Magnificent Marble Machine* or *Alpha 5* was the use of official arcade games, which could be found from regular arcades of the time. In addition, when comparing *Alpha 5* to *Starcade*, it is clear that they are very different from each other, and that the competitive aspect in *Starcade* came from individual performance whereas *Alpha 5* emphasized teamwork in its own way.

Another example of competitive video games shows are ABC's *That's Incredible Video Game Challenge* (The United States/Alan Landsburg 1983) and *Incredible Sunday Special Episode* (The United States/Alan Landsburg 1988). As Riccardo Fassone (2019) notes, the 1983 challenge was the first time the audience could watch a live video game competition from a place other than the stage itself (Fassone 2019). Other notable early competitive shows were *Famiko Daisakusen*¹⁶ (Japan/TV Tokyo 1986-1988), *Video Power* (The United States/Acclaim Entertainment/Saban Interactive 1990-1992) and *Games Master* (Great Britain/Hewland International 1992-1996). One peculiar feature in these shows, especially Japanese ones, is the emphasis on teamwork, much like in *Alpha 5*. *Famiko Daisakusen* and its' sequels, *Famiko Dai Shuugou*¹⁷ (Japan/Alpha Productions 1988-1991) and *Super Mario Club*¹⁸ (Japan/TV Tokyo 1990-1993) provided team competition, two teams against each other.

For some reason, there is very little actual research available for these shows. Articles tend only to refer these shows briefly (e.g. Picard 2008). A lot of research loosely connects the shows, especially *Starcade*, to the history of eSports (see Taylor 2012; Borowy 2013; Hope 2014; Li 2017; Gonzales 2018; Mallin 2018). Francis Lavigne (2017, 13-14) connects the early television shows in his dissertation to the domestication of the video game consoles, which has previously been researched by Erkki Huhtamo (2012) and Benjamin Nicoll (2015). As *Alpha 5* and *Starcade* were based on competition, this connection between the shows and eSports is viable, but the shows have many other qualities that differentiate it from actual competitive gaming, as will be argued later in this chapter.

The characteristics of the early shows considering presenting and narrating video game play are tied to the technology of the era and conventions of the genre of game shows. Narration of the play came through the host or hosts of the show,

¹⁶ Orig. ファミっ子大作戦

¹⁷ Orig. ファミっ子大集合

¹⁸ Orig. スーパーマリオクラブ

while the players remained more silent throughout the playing performance. However, many of these shows featured images split into segments, where one could see the player, the game and in competitive shows the score in their own individual screens within the whole image. Figure 6 shows the way the image was divided in the early shows to give as much information to the audience as possible:



Figure 6: That's Incredible! Video Game Challenge (Alan Landsburg 1983)

As an interesting insight, while the early competitive shows can be seen from the angle of nationalistic spectacle – especially the North American ones – the nationalism and commercialism do not go hand in hand when it comes to technology. While before the great video game crash in 1983, the shows tried to incorporate as much American games into them as possible, the later shows opted for different gaming platforms. In the 1988 Incredible Sunday the show had the possibility of using Atari 7800 as the competition platform, but because of the popularity of the Nintendo Entertainment System, the producers chose the Japanese option. This is further explained by the sales figures of the Atari 7800 seen below:

Sales Activity						19-Jul-1991
Selected Part Numbers (by customer, by ship location)						Page 14
Covering 01/01/88 - 01/01/89						(SLSOR245.RPT)
	US Sales Units	US Sales Revenue	US Returns Units	US Returns Revenue		
BV761244 - ZAYRE CORP. #244	144	\$1,485.00	0			\$.00
BV761251 - ZAYRE CORP. #251	160	\$2,549.00	0			\$.00
BV761254 - ZAYRE CORP. #254	160	\$2,549.00	0			\$.00
BV761619 - ZAYRE CORP. #619	160	\$2,549.00	0			\$.00
BV761623 - ZAYRE CORP. #623	8	\$532.00	0			\$.00
BV761970 - ZAYRE CORP. #970	576	\$38,304.00	0			\$.00
BV761975 - ZAYRE CORP. #975	9526	\$249,143.00	0			\$.00
BV761979 - ZAYRE DIST. CTR. 979	12526	\$340,115.00	0			\$.00
BV761980 - ZAYRE DIST. CTR. 980	14374	\$420,692.00	0			\$.00
BV761995 - ZAYRE DIST. CTR. 995	19950	\$512,373.00	0			\$.00
Totals for account:						
BV761A01 - ZAYRES CORP.	20	\$194.00	0			\$.00
Totals for account:	58380	\$1,576,057.00	2509-			\$166,848.50-
BV783 - CONSUMERS DISTRIBUTING CO						
BV783 - CONSUMERS DISTRIBUTING CO	0	\$.00	249-			\$16,558.50-
BV783EST - CONSUMERS DISTRIBUTING CO	3640	\$242,060.00	0			\$.00
Totals for account:	3640	\$242,060.00	249-			\$16,558.50-
BV792 - LIONEL LEISURE INC.						
BV792 - LIONEL LEISURE INC.	0	\$.00	1921-			\$127,746.50-
BV792099 - LIONEL LEISURE INC. #099	24656	\$725,581.00	624-			\$41,496.00-
BV792100 - LIONEL PLAYWORLD #100	11168	\$322,795.00	177-			\$11,770.50-
BV792200 - LIONEL LEISURE, INC #200	13556	\$419,485.00	483-			\$32,119.50-
BV792400 - LIONEL LEISURE INC. #400	5286	\$246,150.00	103-			\$6,849.50-
BV792444 - LIONEL LEISURE INC. #444	5160	\$112,740.00	0			\$.00
BV792600 - LIONEL PLAYWORLD #600	384	\$5,250.00	45-			\$2,992.50-
BV792666 - LIONEL PLAYWORLD #666	7332	\$206,655.00	0			\$.00
BV792800 - LIONEL PLAYWORLD #800	13614	\$378,294.00	409-			\$27,198.50-
Totals for account:	81156	\$2,416,950.00	3762-			\$250,173.00-
BV800 - SEARS ROEBUCK AND CO.						
BV801002 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1002	200	\$4,695.40	0			\$.00
BV801008 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1008	110	\$3,027.70	0			\$.00
BV801012 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1012	176	\$3,063.40	1-			\$63.00-
BV801018 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1018	98	\$2,211.70	0			\$.00
BV801028 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1028	86	\$1,395.70	0			\$.00
BV801032 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1032	176	\$3,063.40	0			\$.00
BV801041 - SEARS ROEBUCK #1041	176	\$3,063.40	0			\$.00

Figure 7: Excerpt from official Atari 7800 sales reports

Curt Vendel, the owner of the Atari History Museum, provided the sales data via Atariage-forums¹⁹. As seen in Figure 7, the data features the number of console units sold, factory return figures and the revenue gained from the sales in each retail shop. This same kind of detailed data was not available for Nintendo, which resulted in searching for other sources. These were, for example, coeval news articles (McGill 1988), books (Gunter 1998, 13) and research articles (e.g. Suominen 2015, 79).

This set of different data regarding the Atari 7800 in comparison to the sales of the NES, regarding the U.S. Video Game Team and Incredible Sunday, makes the choice of system in the episode understandable. From a closer look in the data, the amounts of Atari 7800 units sold and especially the return figures prove, that Atari 7800 was a hard sale and could not compete with Nintendo. Atari and Nintendo were rivals to each other in the late 1980s console market and Atari tried to promote the 7800 through the U.S. Video Game Team; as such, going with the NES for promotion on the show was a peculiar choice. That choice was perhaps one of the key factors in the success of the NES in 1988, as the system sold millions of units in the holiday season of 1988 alone, partly because of the

¹⁹ <https://atariage.com/forums/topic/144552-happy-25th-7800-sales-figures-attached/>
Retrieved 10.9.2019

chip shortage earlier the same year and partly because of the marketing (Harrington 1988 & Lazzareschi 1988).

These early competitive shows are also quite close to reality television. After all, the obvious main attraction was to see other people play the games. Looking at especially *Starcade* and the ABC's video game challenges, there is an element of a supposed reality within the spectacle. In these, the players were shortly introduced and/or interviewed by the hosts, through which the audience gained information about where the players were from and what were their gaming backgrounds. In my opinion, there is a good reason for this: to be able to promote the games to the audience via the television shows, the games needed to look desirable and first and foremost, fun to play.

However, as the presentation of video gaming as an activity in these shows is visually done in the style of a sports spectacle, the focus in the image is not entirely on the game, but also on the player and the video gaming performance, so that the player becomes the athlete and the game becomes the sport. As it is in sports spectacles, they elevate the athletes to a position of a celebrity and in general a person to look up to (Kellner 2003, 65-69). Early competitive gaming did have its share of video game celebrities, for example Billy Mitchell and Todd Rogers for their achievements and fame in *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) and *Dragster* (Activision 1980) - although both high scores were questioned in the later years. Therefore, it is assumable, that the players and especially the winners in *That's Incredible* and *Incredible Sunday* could also have had a celebrity status due to their victories, even though the spectacles probably weren't powerful enough to create lasting star power.

As to the aspect of power in these television spectacles, they are not profoundly political, but rather seem to aim to empower the television media and the video game market (see Kellner 2003, 1-2 & 11-12). This comes through a couple of things. First, as these arcade machines were not seen on television very often and in a competitive sense, nowhere outside the two *Incredible*-episodes, these episodes were quite probably good promotion for the producer Alan Landsburg and the channel ABC. Secondly, of course, these shows were great showcases for arcade game companies and through the publicity, the shows also directed the consumers towards these games. It is also debatable, whether the arcade game companies aimed to promote these games to a broader audience outside the game enthusiasts or not.

In some competitive shows, the audience could participate in the game by calling into the show. The first show of this kind was *TV Powww!!!* (The United States/Marvin Kempner 1978-1990), which aired in the United States as a part of a morning show called *A.M. Los Angeles* (The United States/Michael Gelman 1978-current) on the channel KABC-TV. *TV Powww!!!* was a voice-controlled show, where the caller operated the game by shouting "pow!" to the phone, which then resulted in a fired bullet from the cannon shown on screen. Even though the game was competitive by nature, it is quite different from the shows mentioned above, as the players did not compete against one another, but rather tried to achieve a high score in hope for prizes. Therefore, *TV Powww!!!* and the

shows where audience could play the game from their own homes using their telephones contribute more to the history of interactive television and the evolution of game shows in general, rather than in the evolution of competitive gaming.

However, these shows gained most of their popularity in the 1990s, with several different types of phone-in television shows appearing around the world. The most famous phone-in format was *Hugo the Troll* (Denmark/ITE Entertainment 1990-2006), which was broadcast in more than 40 countries around the world over a period of nearly two decades. Developed by Danish engineer Ivan Sølvason, *Hugo* started the trend of broadcasting interactive, real-time video gaming on television, with the audience participating in the show by calling into the studio and controlling the game with a telephone. Sølvason had experimented with the technology before, with shows called *oSWald* (Denmark/Nordisk Film 1988-1989) and *Super oSWald* (Denmark/Nordisk Film 1989-1990).

Alongside *Hugo*, some other implementations of the phone-in technology were introduced in many different shows. The other shows started using retail video games with this technology, dismissing the proprietary software-system like *Hugo* and its followers, even though *Hugo* was later ported to several home gaming systems, like the Sony PlayStation. Shows such as *Elektor Kalandor* (Hungary/TV1 1990-1993), *Games World* (Great Britain/Hewland International 1993-1998), *Game Over* (Finland/Viihdefarmi 1994-1997) and *Maxihra* (Slovakia/Markiza 1997-200) used coeval gaming consoles, mainly the Super Nintendo, Philips CD-i and Sony PlayStation to lure the audience to try the games from the homes.

The spectacular aspect of these shows comes from the combination of the telephone and television technology. In the 1990's, to watch people play video games in television from their own homes was certainly something spectacular. There is, of course, the angle of commercialism present. Some of the shows presented games that were available to purchase from stores and featured advertisements of the games in the breaks. *Hugo*, however, became a commercial phenomenon of its own, as the character was brought not only to home consoles to play, but also to all kinds of items, such as t-shirts, figurines and coffee mugs. In short, perhaps these phone-in shows were not so much about the player, but rather just commercial spectacles, as unlike the other competitive shows I have talked about, these shows did not feature an image of the player on the screen.

In their later years, the television shows started taking influence from the online world. More emphasis was put onto competitive gaming and with shows such as *Arena* (The United States/G4tv 2002-2005), *OverDose* (Finland/Moon TV 2002) and *The Match* (Great Britain & Italy/TNWA Group 2007-2009), these shows started to feature insights into the upcoming eSports culture. From the angle of lifestyle programs, *Tsurega*²⁰ (Japan/Tsukuba TV 2010-2016), *Expediente S* (Chile/Juan Andrés Salfate 2011-current), *Hrajeme s Alim* (Czech Republic/Prima Cool 2015-2016) and *Dara O Briain's Go 8 Bit* (Great

²⁰ Orig. つれゲー

Britain/Darren Soul 2016-2018) all tried to capture the attention of YouTubeing youth. The way they tried to do this was by featuring YouTubers in the show, playing games in a Let's Play-style fashion and incorporating the online lifestyle into the production. Figure 8 shows an example of this from Tsurega. It is worth noting the layout of the image, dividing players, gameplay footage, and the commentary into their own respective spaces. While the layout is familiar from, for example, the early competitive shows, the lack of a scoring system and the nature of the show, which features just the two players reacting to the game, is an original concept in comparison to other similar shows. At the same time, this type of immediate reacting to a game is a very familiar element found in many online videos.



Figure 8: An example of image layout from Tsurega (Tsukuba TV 2010-2016)

In the mid-1990s, some of the shows also tried to compete with traditional video game journalism. Shows such as *VideoXOC* (Spain/TV3 1992-1995), *The Zone* (Australia/Nine Network 1994-1995), *Cybernet* (Great Britain/ITV 1995-2008) and other magazine-inspired shows were very popular at that time, featuring video game and system reviews, visits to gaming exhibitions and interviews with game developers.

Many of these shows incorporated multiple different ideas into their programming schedule, with phone-in and in-studio competitive gaming added to complement the journalistic angle. Stylistically, the shows were angled towards lifestyle programs (see Smith 2010 & Palmer 2016) rather than professional journalism. As the shows tried to appeal to their target audience with bright colors, fashionable clothing and street language, they also marketed

video gaming as a lifestyle, although this wasn't always in line with what the producers thought video gaming lifestyle should look and be like (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Colorful studio environment in The Zone

The angle of the social structure of watching others play is important in this context, as gathering around to a friends' place to play together and witness gaming activity from up close is very different from watching others play on television or the Internet. As Lee & Lee (1995) found out in their interviews in regard of the habits of watching television in The United States, watching prime-time television was considered a social activity in the 1990s, something to share with the whole family (Lee & Lee, 1995). Later research (e.g. Cesar & Geerts 2011), however, shows that there was a change in the social ways of watching television, and suggests that during the 2000s people started to watch television more on their own, as television sets became cheaper and more available. This meant that in The United States, households had more television sets available and they were placed in e.g. bedrooms and kitchens.

Especially the television shows in the 1990s are a varied group of different types of television. What does connect these shows, however, is the colourful imagery and a certain aspect of "cool". Even though the shows were different in style from each other, the imagery of these shows present the 1990s and the video games in a fast, bright and fun fashion. One could argue that the whole of the 1990s looked like that.

3.2 Competitive gaming today

The research on electronic sports (abbr. eSports) has grown a lot in the recent years. Research around competitive gaming today often focuses on the angle of physical activity, psychology, and commercialism, to name a few. As the amount of contemporary eSports research is vast, I will only situate my studies to those that are relevant to my own research. Those are the history of competitive gaming, spectating competitive play, representing the action of competitive video gaming in the television broadcasts and the relation of eSports to other live-action representations of video gaming.

In the 1990s, competitive gaming appeared at different regional championship tournaments, such as the Finnish National Championships (see Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018). One of the earliest steps towards eSports today was the fighting game tournament Evolution Champion Series, which started in 1996 and is still going on today (see Crecente 2008, Summerley 2020). The competitive tendencies towards video gaming were also on the rise in the emergence of speedrunning²¹. After the year 2000, eSports was on a new path, as several competitive games could be played over the internet and broadcast. This also led to the actual institutionalizing of eSports (Summerley 2020, 4–7).

The main channel of broadcasting competitive gaming today is online live streaming via services such as Twitch and YouTube. Occasionally the games are also being broadcast on television. For example, Finnish national broadcaster YLE has over the course of years done a remarkable job at bringing eSports, especially *Counter-Strike* and *League of Legends* to national television. In 2020, Finnish commercial television company MTV3 also brought competitive NHL-video gaming to its stations in companionship with telecommunications company Telia.

From the perspective of presentation, eSports do have things in common with the other genres discussed in this dissertation. Much like in the other forms of presenting video game play, video games are mainly a tool for representing the athletic performance. What many eSports add to this, however, is the aspect of teamwork and professional competition. eSports represents gaming as intense and furious competition, where teamwork is just as necessary as the skill at the game. A few recognized eSports-games focus on competitive individual activity rather than teamwork. Examples include *Starcraft 2*, *Fortnite*, *Super Smash Bros.* and *Trackmania*. Even then, the professional players are usually playing as a part of an eSports organization, while being solo athletes at the same time.

Regarding presenting eSports tournaments as sports events, many researchers have pondered on whether eSports can actually be considered sports in the first place. Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Oldrich (2017) compare traditional definitions of sports with eSports to see if competitive gaming can be considered sports in an academic sense (Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Oldrich 2017). Jim Parry (2019) sees that eSports differ from traditional sports in that they do not involve

²¹ See ch. 3.2.1

the same kind of physical activity that traditional sports require and therefore, according to Parry, eSports cannot be regarded as sports (Parry 2019). The question of physical activity seems to be a big one, as Kristin Hallman and Thomas Giel (2018) also argue that based on Brian Rodgers' 1977 definition of requirements of sports (Rodgers 1977), eSports do not fulfill the criteria of physical activity to be called as such. Then again, Hallman and Giel believe that eSports could become generally recognized as sports in the course of time (Hallman & Giel 2018).

While the argument about whether eSports are actual sports or a physical activity is not that important for this research, the audience might wish to disagree with the researchers, as watching eSports does not differ that much from watching sports events. As Cheung and Huang (2011) pointed out in their study, much of the enjoyment of being an eSports spectator comes from the same elements as watching traditional sports: the strategies, the suspense, and the aesthetics of the experience. The study also claims that many video game players prefer to watch pro-gamers perform rather than playing themselves (Cheung & Huang 2011, 767-769). My own research suggests that the similarities between watching eSports and sports might be deliberate, as there is evidence that the earliest televised video game tournaments took influence in their visual arrangements and settings from the world of sports and might therefore have affected the way contemporary competitive gaming is presented live (Kerttula 2020). Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) also argue that the enjoyment of watching eSports derives from many visual elements associated with sports, such as the physical attractiveness of the players and the drama of the events unfolding in the game (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017).

Today, eSports is the most spectated representation of video gaming in the world. The best known games, such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation 2012) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) each have their own leagues and tournaments to complement the competitive nature of the games. Sports stadiums around the world host the biggest events, and the organizers stream these events through Twitch and other services to millions of households around the world.

These big events are in many ways easily comparable to sports spectacles, based on my own experience as an eSports spectator. Live audience watches the athletes perform from a distance, as the gaming celebrities themselves are secluded to the center of the focus in the arena. The ongoing events in the game are presented in large screens around the same arena, so that the audience can see how their favorite players perform in the game, while at the same time they can watch the reactions and physical presence at the nominated space for players. In the hallways, the players give autographs and many different memorabilia and gaming gear are available to purchase from different booths located in the space. Basically, watching the event live is very much like going to an ice hockey- or a basketball game. Marcella Szablewicz (2016, 257-258) also depicted this same kind of eSports spectacle. So again, the spectacle is a very commercial event,

which aims to make profit for the eSports team and also the varied gaming gear companies.

As these big eSports spectacles revolve around the game itself and at the same time with the commercialist aspects promote the eSports lifestyle by offering products that supposedly make you a better gamer, they do not seem to promote the games themselves quite as much. The games are the established sports that the athletes compete in, and the focus of the spectacle is more on the athletes and their gear rather than the games. Because of this, it could prove to be hard to bring new games into the eSports scene. The newer games are first subject to traditional video game marketing before becoming eSports. The games need the player- and fan base before they can establish themselves as actual eSports. As the older games have gathered their audience years prior to the releases of the new games, they do not face the same kind of challenge regarding the audience and the more the older games are played, the more they cement their status as the recognized eSports events.

3.3 Speedrunning

One important style of competitive gaming is speedrunning, the race to complete a video game as fast as possible (e.g. Scully-Blaker 2014). Originally throughout the 1980's, speedrunning was without commentary, recorded on VHS-tapes that were sent to an arcade called Twin Galaxies in Ottumwa, Iowa to be evaluated by the arcade officials, including the founder of the arcade, Walter Day (Snyder 2017, 37). The real starting point of mainstream speedrunning can be traced back to the game *Doom* (iD Software 1993) and the ability to record a performance as a demo file. The early speedrunning scene was all about the play performance. With no commentary (if online forum discussions are not counted), speed was the most important thing. Other important factors were the ability to learn new speedrunning tricks from other runners through the demo files and online discussions (Brewster 2018). The distinction between speedrunning and other styles of video game representation is important to make, as speedrunning has also evolved a lot during the last ten years and is easy to confuse with other similar-looking representations, such as Let's Plays or longplays.

In his conference presentation, Dom Ford (2018) compares speedrunning to freerunning and parkour as transgressing the activity. A speedrunner tries to find other ways of progressing in the game than the developers originally intended, much like a freerunner tries to find ways of using city architecture as obstacles (Ford 2018). The mathematics of this are explained in greater depth in Manuel Lafond's article about optimizing different flaws in a game (Lafond 2018). James Newman (2019) also observed the different ways speedrunners "break" the game by exploiting different movement mechanics and sequence breaks. The latter allows players to skip some slow parts of the game entirely by finding parts of the game code that are exploitable for speed. (Newman 2019, 19–23). With this, speedrunners also make the game code their playground, as opposed to

freerunning and overcoming different obstacles in the game world. Some speedrunners are specifically “routers”, who seek for bugs in the game code for others to exploit. They are not to be confused with tool-assisted speedrunners – or TASers – that use third-party software such as emulators to optimize the run in different ways. For example, a TASer might exploit a save-function in an emulator to capture different parts of the run multiple times and after that, edit the video so that it looks like a complete run. TASing has been a difficult subject among speedrunners for a long time, but these days it is recognized as its own mode of speedrunning and the tool-assisted times are uploaded to a dedicated TAS-site, TASVideos²². Even though tool-assisted runs are different from other speedruns, they still do fit the both Ford’s views of transgressive activity and Newman’s observations of breaking the game flow (ibid.).

The nature of speedrunning makes this domain its own entity, apart from Let’s Playing and eSports. Despite demanding lots of skill and devotion, a discussion about whether speedrunning should be regarded as eSports has been around for a while, mostly thanks to the rising popularity of the phenomenon through events like Awesome Games Done Quick, which is an annual event held since 2010 (Heuer 2018; Reilly 2018; Waigand 2019). During these live events, the objective is to highlight the skill of the speedrunner, instead of having actual competitions. Then again, from the point of view of my research, Awesome Games Done Quick and other modern speedrunning events have transformed and commodified speedrunning into something different from what it was in the days of Doom and Quake. I am arguing that modern speedrunning has taken influence from Let’s Plays and eSports, as before online streaming and YouTube, speedrunning was limited to dedicated online communities and was not as well-known as it is today. Perhaps, though, the influence has gone in both directions. Maybe some Let’s Players have taken influences from the relaxed and social style of speedrunning presented in events like Awesome Games Done Quick?

²² <http://tasvideos.org/>

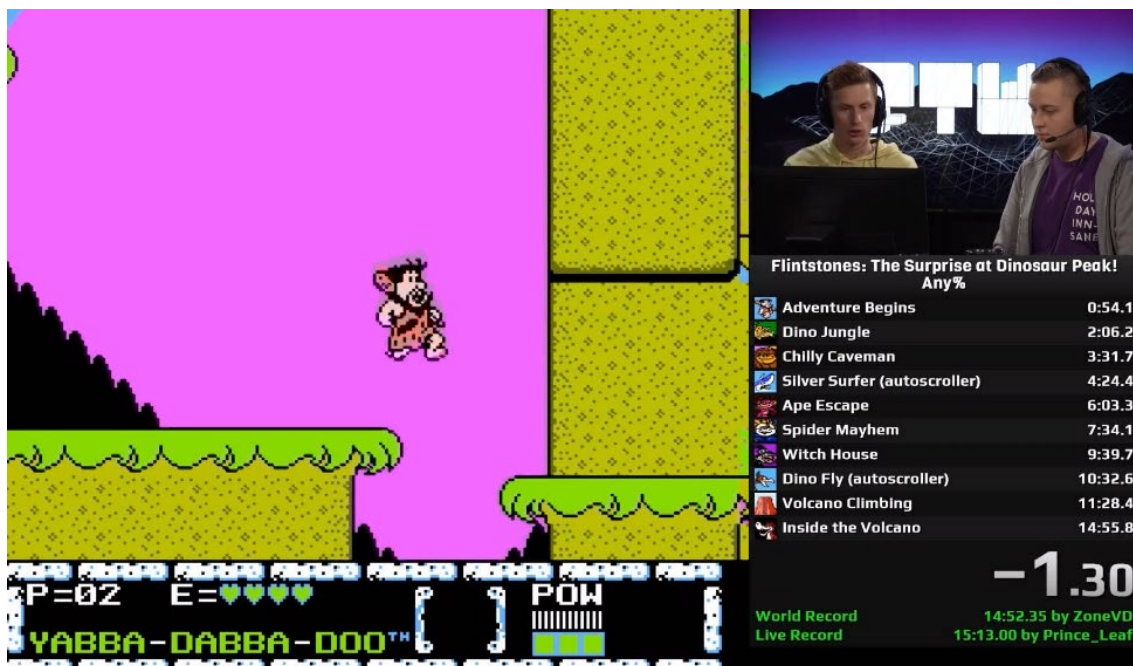


Figure 10: FTW Live x Speedrun (Finland 2018)

As Figure 10 above shows, there are many different visual elements supporting the action in ways that are also found in eSports, live streaming and Let's Plays. The most notable elements are the image of the player in the upper corner and dividing the image to show different types of graphic to help the spectators follow the performance: in this case, for example, the split times between each checkpoint. The narration in modern speedrunning is comparable to the narration of a Let's Play. Again, the player has a dual-role of player-narrator, and the banter has many of the elements found from Let's Plays. In most cases, the speedrunner describes the actions done in the run:

"We're using the machine gun. The machine gun is just a standard weapon. Thing is, when you get to know how to use this standard weapon, you can fight against this game fairly reliably, in fact."²³

Besides describing the action, the speedrunner can also talk about the relationship between themselves and the game, reflecting with the audience and talking about the game in general. In my studies, I refer to these elements of narration as game-mechanics narration, reflective narration, descriptive narration and audiovisual narration (Kerttula 2019a, 242–246, 247–248). These elements are also present in traditional Let's Play narration. The most notable omission in the narrative elements is the element of alternative narration (Kerttula 2019a, 249–250). Because the presentation and narration in speedrunning and Let's Plays can resemble each other closely, the difference

²³ Contra III: The Alien Wars by Aquas in 23:29 - AGDQ 2018
<https://youtu.be/Y5LrQMGCdvU>

between the two is sometimes difficult to make, although from the narrative point of view, the distinction is clearer. This is because in most speedruns the narrative focuses on the play performance and the game mechanics, while at the same time explaining the different techniques and strategies the speedrunner uses to achieve the fastest possible time in the game.

These days speedrunning can be a very social event. In *Awesome Games Done Quick* and, in another example, on the Finnish television show *FTW Live* (Finland/YLE 2018), the speedrunner constantly commentates the run while playing. In these cases, there are usually one or more other commentators present in the side, as well as an audience behind the runner cheering for the digital athlete. Speedrunning, much like other electronic sports, is a spectacle, albeit a unique one. Especially when done in front of a live audience, like in the *Awesome Games Done Quick* -events, the visual spectacle is evident, with the crowd cheering on the speedrunners and commentators narrating the structure of the event. There are even interviews of the speedrunners between each speedrun. Regarding this, the live events are a different spectacle compared to the actual speedrunning and are actually structured much like live eSports-events. As these live speedrunning marathons are usually charity events, the commercialism and nationalism are very low-key. Instead, the events use the spectacle to promote an inclusive image of the speedrunning community, presenting and naming different genders in the way the players want them to be presented (see Figure 11) and removing the competition from the equation.



Figure 11: Transgender speedrunner Lizstar performing in front of a live audience in *Awesome Games Done Quick 2020*

In short, in the speedrunning marathons, the spectacle promotes the inclusiveness of the speedrunning community, which also at the same time can be looked at as a spectacle of self. The major difference in the spectacle when compared to Let's Plays and eSports is that this promotion is seemingly done on purpose, as even though the video game footage is the main attraction of the marathons, the on-screen graphics and the interviews with the players are geared more towards giving an idea of the attitudes in the community. Overall then, speedrunning stands at the border between Let's Playing – which I will explain further in the next section – and eSports, incorporating elements from both of these two worlds.

3.4 Let's Plays in online video services

According to several websites, such as Know Your Meme²⁴ and Kotaku (Klepek 2015), the earliest Let's Play with video footage was a walkthrough of *Super Metroid* (Nintendo 1994) by Michael Sawyer, better known by his nickname *slowbeef*. Sawyer published the Let's Play as 31 different videos through Google Video. The Let's Play began in January 19, 2007 and finished March 3, 2007²⁵. He was later involved in creating another phenomenon called *Retsupurae*, in which the commentators make satirical versions of Let's Play videos by dubbing over the original sounds.²⁶

To define the term Let's Play briefly, the easiest route is to take both words and examine them. When something is labelled as Let's Play, it also features a social dimension. Let's play together, let's play this game, let's play something and have fun. The term itself seems to denote that this is something to be shared with others - the viewers or the readers. There are not seemingly any factors, which define what games are being Let's Played, practically any game can be Let's Played. Though by looking at the most popular Let's Plays available, they are showing universally popular games, such as Roblox. Therefore by taking a quick look at the Let's Play scene, it is easy to see that it is a chaotic one, as there is no single set way of doing a Let's Play. Therefore, to understand what a Let's Play is about, we need to categorize and analyze the videos and the creators.

As the phenomenon is still quite young, the research of Let's Plays is also in its early years. The earliest research, to my knowledge, is Kris Ligman's "Let's Play Super Rutgers RPG", published in 2011. Through a few examples, Ligman identifies four general archetypes of player-narrators in Let's Play: the chronicler, the showman, the comedian and the counter-historian (Ligman 2011, 8-9). These archetypes still serve well to describe different genres inside the whole LP phenomenon. Even though the taxonomy described in the article is seemingly

²⁴ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/lets-play>

²⁵ <https://lparchive.org/Super-Metroid/>

²⁶ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/retsupurae>

preliminary, it still works for the most part. The most interesting notion based on this taxonomy is that the genre is very reliant on the performance of the player-narrator. If the video has a comedic purpose, the narration must also be comedic and the visuals have to support this kind of narration. This applies to all kinds of Let's Plays. The style of a Let's Play has changed and evolved somewhat since its emergence. All Let's Plays are not long stories where the game is being played from start to finish. One style that deviates from the original is the clip show Let's Play, where the footage is heavily edited to make it easier to make fun of the game.

Regarding transmedia storytelling and convergence, Let's Plays change the original video game content into an unplayable movie, which alters the storyline of the original object. This new content creates a new story around the original video game footage, which the player-narrator edits. This leads to the narration being the most important set piece in the spectacle of real in a Let's Play. From here, I am referring to Let's Players as player-narrators, as the players create the story while playing the game. The Let's Play can be scripted beforehand, which is usually the case for heavily edited Let's Plays, but still in these cases the narration process is linked to the gameplay and the activity of playing a video game.

Some Let's Plays are written in a more novel way, making the whole process seem like an adventure rather than playing a game. To do this, player-narrators can create an avatar in the game world to narrate a story of the character. Fanny Barnabé (2018) explored this angle in her DiGRA conference presentation, *Rhetoric of Let's Play: From Play to Narrative Show*. She calls this action avatar roleplay, with different angles of acting with the character in the game world. One of these angles was the dialogue between the avatar and the player-narrator, as if the avatar would respond to the player-narrator's commentary (Barnabé 2018). I call this action reflective narration, because the inner dialogue between the player-narrator and the avatar is in many ways the same as with the reflection between the player-narrator and the audience. Even though there is no audience, the player-narrator can assume so (Kerttula 2019a, 247-249). Josef Ngyuen (2016) claims that the act of creating a Let's Play is definitely a performance, and even though the player-narrator would not create a purposeful avatar, narrating a video game is always a performance, and the player-narrator is a role in itself (Ngyuen 2016).

Through the narration and storification, Let's Plays have also been looked at as a display of video game culture. As Niklas Nylund (2015) has noted, because the focus is on the players and narrative rather than the game, Let's Plays can be considered as a method of preserving video game culture (Nylund 2015, 57). Thomas Hale (2013) also discusses this in a chapter of his dissertation. Hale has an emphasis on the narration but does not explicitly talk about oral history. Rather, Hale looks at Let's Plays as documentaries of video game play, which include the narration and the visual information about the game, and act as forms of preservation in this way. As many Let's Plays fail to be complete stories of a video game experience from either point of view, Hale sees Let's Plays as

“incomplete documents” (Hale 2013, 9-15). However, in the recent years the genre of the Let’s Play has evolved. In Hale’s dissertation Let’s Plays are still viewed as content, where the game is being played from the beginning to the end. As many Let’s Plays today are edited footage and might not contain the gameplay from the beginning to the end, the angle of preservation raises a few more questions, the most important being how much gameplay needs to be recorded to preserve the most essential parts of a video game. As a sidenote, Hale also sees speedrunning as a part of the Let’s Play phenomenon (ibid., 7-8), while as discussed above²⁷, it is a phenomenon of its own.

The angle of preservation is very much worth a later discussion, because in quite a few Let’s Plays the player-narrators play old games, considered as “retro” (Finniss 2009). David Heineman’s essay about nostalgic gaming discusses this and considers the online videos as a part of a larger online fan base devoted to retro gaming, such as the *Angry Video Game Nerd* and *Classic Game Room* (Heineman 2014, 18). In his article about the nostalgia of *Commander Keen* (Apogee Software 1990) in Let’s Plays, Simon Rehbach (2016) identifies three different types of nostalgia the Let’s Plays of these old games create in the audience. The first one relates to oral history and preservation, as according to Rehbach, player-narrators are referring to their own experiences with the games. From this, the player-narrators also make comparisons between the old and the new and reflect the whole medium in their narration (Rehbach 2016, 181-193). One reason for this could be that the player-narrators want to relive a game they have already played and, via a Let’s Play, share their experience of diving into the game after many years in front of an online audience. Another reason could be the player-narrator’s own will to experience old games that they have never played before, in a style known as the “blind” Let’s Play²⁸, and share their reaction to these classic games with the audience. These factors affect the narrative. Whether the player-narrator has played the game in the past or not, there is a reason for picking up this older game and sharing the gameplay. A Let’s Player must connect to the game he is playing in some way and narrate this to the audience. While, for example, a walkthrough tells us imperatively what to do, a Let’s Play tells us a story about the adventures of one individual in the land of video games. Of course, Let’s Plays can work as a walkthrough, as in many cases they take the audience through each nook and cranny of the game.

Although the styles of Let’s Plays are multiple, a simple way of looking at them is to say that watching them is like watching a movie, a reaction video or a vlog, just as watching eSports resembles watching traditional sports. The player-narrators sometimes script their Let’s Plays beforehand, while in other cases the videos resemble more closely reaction-videos on YouTube, by way of instantly connecting with and narrating the activity. The games performed do not need to

²⁷ See Ch. 3.3.

²⁸ See e.g. Let’s Play Megaman 1 (BLIND) Part 1 – What Have I Gotten Myself Into <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb1v5QuWc10>

have competitive aspects, although in multiplayer games a certain amount of competition can be present.²⁹

Let's Plays can also be analyzed as text. Paula Garnett (2019) researched, in her master's thesis, the ways in which player-narrators create the bond with their audience, through textual analysis. In the analysis, it seems that with different rhetorical methods, such as questions and imperatives, the narrators intrigue and hook the audience. The narrators also do this with their expressions and tone of voice (Garnett 2019, 42–44 & 46–53). Sari Piittinen (2018) had a similar angle in her doctoral thesis about the gothic elements in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008). What Piittinen especially sought after was the players' interpretation of gothic through several Let's Plays. While her research centers more around the player-narrator and interpretation, her method of using Let's Plays as research data is also valid for my research. This is because, as Piittinen underlines, Let's Plays offer multiple different angles to research a video game experience, even though the narration is often sporadic in nature (Piittinen 2018, 63–81).

When looking at the narration and style of a Let's Play, it could be hard to see the differences between a professional and an amateur producer. The importance of this magnifies when arguing that the answer to the question "What makes a YouTuber popular?" is the narration and the persona of the player-narrator, in addition to the games played being interesting enough. This is the view I put forward here. When comparing the narrative style in the Let's Plays of the two *Phantasmagoria* games analyzed in one of my articles, there are notable differences in their style, even though the amateur player-narrator was clearly influenced by the professional one created by Spooky.

There are a number of elements where the narration contributes to the supposed real of a Let's Play. If we look at some early transcribed outtakes from Antwiler's *Phantasmagoria 2* -narration, these elements become more clear:

"I'm just doing this to spur the moments, mainly because I just bought this at used books store and I have never played this game before. I played the original and liked it a lot back at the day. Of course it hasn't aged well at all. I mean it was one of those huge disc-swap games. It was known more mainly for its mature content, I mean it has nipples and shit and rape and stuff like that, I mean it was really groundbreaking at its time."

Here, Antwiler speaks about his own relationship with the game in a self-reflective manner, while also speaking about the different controversies *Phantasmagoria 2* stirred up in its time. The reflective narration seen here is very sporadic and contains curse words, but also discusses the more controversial themes and events in the game. As this narration appears in the beginning of the Let's Play, the reflective narration is combined with descriptive narration to

²⁹ See e.g. Let's Play Crash Team Racing Nitro-Fueled MULTIPLAYER (Game of Karts) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvcVE2eWqk> & Let's Play Super Mario Party Nintendo Switch 4 Player Multiplayer Gameplay Whomps Domino Ruins Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDjPAZDdfNY>

create an image of the relationship of the narrator to the game. Thus, it becomes obvious that the narration is a key element in creating the spectacle of real.

Through these different narrative elements, the player-narrators bring a perhaps controversial component to the spectacle – the self. The image of self becomes problematic, when the YouTuber creates controversies with his/her actions and appears for example sexist (Lorenz & Browning 2020), racist (Ivan 2020), or visualizes harmful political views (Romano 2017). As developers have only a little control over what a YouTuber plays, and how the game is being presented (see Chapter 1), the spectacle can turn against both the developer and the YouTuber. These problems become even more affective because of the supposed real. Even if the episodes with the controversies were scripted beforehand, they are brought upon the audience as reality, promoting the controversial statements as actual opinions of the person speaking. Therefore, the controversies are comparable to for example social media posts and when connected to the video game featured in the video, these statements connect the game at the same time to the controversy. As the most popular player-narrators are definitely celebrities, the idea of losing the celebrity status because of controversies is current. However, as many of the non-professional YouTubers and player-narrators are not celebrities, they are not likely to suffer this fate, as they cannot be considered celebrities, even though they are like the professionals creating spectacles with their recordings.

Overall, when looking at the promotion of a society and its values in speedrunning and *Awesome Games Done Quick* and the few controversial examples from the *Let's Playing* world, it becomes obvious, that the spectacle of playing a video game in these examples does not come without notable societal factors. Instead of being hidden under the spectacle, in these examples these factors are in plain view. However, as I have established earlier in this dissertation, the spectacle of playing a video game in live-action footage is more about the player than the game. This is underlined by the fact, that a game can be and usually is *Let's Played* by a number of different YouTubers. This leads to an important observation: the player-narrators play the games each time from different perspectives and backgrounds, as the experience of playing a game is always individual. If the players have played the game before, the choices made might have led to different results, giving them a different experience of the story. Some player-narrators fool around in the game for the purpose of comedy and entertainment, but others try to make their *Let's Plays* more serious. It is through this kind of performance that it becomes clear how *Let's Players* tend to put the focus on themselves rather than the game (Croshaw 2011, 2) and connect the game to a larger network of media, such as movies, music and memes (Kerttula 2019a, 252–253). This supports Henry Jenkins' views of converging media culture (Jenkins 2006, *ibid.*).

The forms of presenting video game play discussed in this dissertation are easy to confuse with longplays and machinima. In a way, both share visual and narrative elements with *Let's Plays* and television shows. In longplays, the major difference when compared to *Let's Plays* is the omission of the narrator.

Longplays usually feature complete captured footage from a video game and, in most cases, show how the game is played from start to finish. Visually, the idea in longplays is to capture the gameplay in the original resolution and framerate, thus representing the gameplay as close to what the game would actually look like when played with the original system³⁰.

Because Let's Plays transform the original game into another kind of story (Kerttula 2019a), they could potentially be considered as a form of machinima³¹, where the gameplay content transforms into something else, even visually. However, the nature of machinima is very different. Machinima is one of the oldest creative forms using video game content, starting from the early 1990s with Disney Interactive's *Stunt Island* (The Assembly Line 1992), which allowed the players to create their own sets for different plane stunts and film them in the game engine using different camera positions and angles. From there machinima grew even further with the replay abilities of *Doom* and *Quake* (iD Software 1996)³². Curiously enough, this sets the history of machinima on the same line with the emergence of speedrunning, which also began with *Doom* replays. Even at the early stages of the phenomenon, the recordings of *Doom* set the camera outside the first-person perspective that was normally used in-game. For machinima creators, the game is more like a set piece for completely new kind of media that can be created using the set pieces of the game world (Lowood 2011, 7 & 17-18). The examples of media created with machinima vary from movies created with a game engine³³ to comics³⁴.

From a technological point of view, Let's Plays – and longplays – also make it possible to see gameplay footage on different platforms. In fact, longplays transfer the original story and narration of the game to a new medium. From there we can make a distinction for Let's Plays, which are then more closely connected to the concept of convergence. From the viewpoint of a spectacle and reality, the longplays represent the game in the means of real, whereas the spectacle created by machinima is akin to cinema. This added, Let's Plays, television shows and eSports are phenomena of their own, the relationship between all the other forms of video game based media with longplays and machinima is evident. They all present recorded or live-streamed footage from video games and even create something new from the footage, but are still each a phenomena of their own.

³⁰ World of Longplays – FAQ https://www.longplays.eu/viewpage.php?page_id=1
Retrieved 11.11.2019

³¹ Not to be confused with the now-defunct corporation, Machinima, Inc. See Machinima <https://www.machinima.com/> Retrieved 11.11.2019

³² The origins and evolution of Machinima <https://voices.uchicago.edu/machinima/sample-page/> Retrieved 15.11.2019

³³ See Alex Chan – The French Democracy, 2005 <https://archive.org/details/thefrenchdemocracy> Retrieved 11.11.2019

³⁴ See Machinima / Comics | Minecraft: Education Edition <https://education.minecraft.net/lessons/machinima-comics/> Retrieved 11.11.2019

3.5 Relation of written Let's Plays and video game journalism to live-action Let's Plays

Even though my main focus in this dissertation is on the live-action representations of video gaming, the written origins of the Let's Plays are a key building block in understanding how the narration of playing a video game has come together. Let's Plays were born as forum posts in 2006 on the forums of the website Something Awful (Kerttula 2019a). They were written as plain text covering the antics of a gamer, often including a few screenshots to give a visual narrative on the side. Even though the live-action Let's Plays emerged quickly after the first written ones, this kind of Let's Play -narration is still very much alive, and new written Let's Plays come out every now and then in the form of forum posts, or written novels in the Let's Play Archive.

Written Let's Plays share many qualities with the live-action ones. The one obvious difference is the visual of the gameplay, which is represented only by screenshots instead of recorded footage from the game. On the other hand, one element that remains constant is the narrator, even though they do not react to the events in the game in real-time. The narrator is omniscient, like in live-action Let's Plays, and takes a different role in the game world instead of his own personality (Barnabé 2018). Therefore, the major differences relate to the visual representation of the game, whereas the narration can be very similar to live-action Let's Plays, although instead of watching a video, the audience is now reading a story.

To prove this and to find a possible contrast between Spooky's live-action Let's Plays and written Let's Plays, I started searching for other Let's Plays about *Phantasmagoria 2*, but in text-form, to see how the narrations between written Let's Plays and live-action Let's Plays differ from each other. However, at the time of the research, there were no written Let's Plays of *Phantasmagoria 2* available. Therefore, I turned my search towards Let's Plays of the first *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line 1995). The search resulted in two different Let's Plays, but one of them was not complete at the time. Therefore, Reg Franklins Let's Play (Figure 12) was the only option and luckily, a good one. The author transferred from Let's Play to another domain since the research began, which sadly makes the URL referred to in the original article now obsolete.³⁵ It seems that Franklin posted into the website as a one long post, but there is still the possibility that he originally split the Let's Play into several posts.

³⁵ The new URL is <http://jizzwailing.blogspot.com/p/lets-play-phantasmagorria.html>

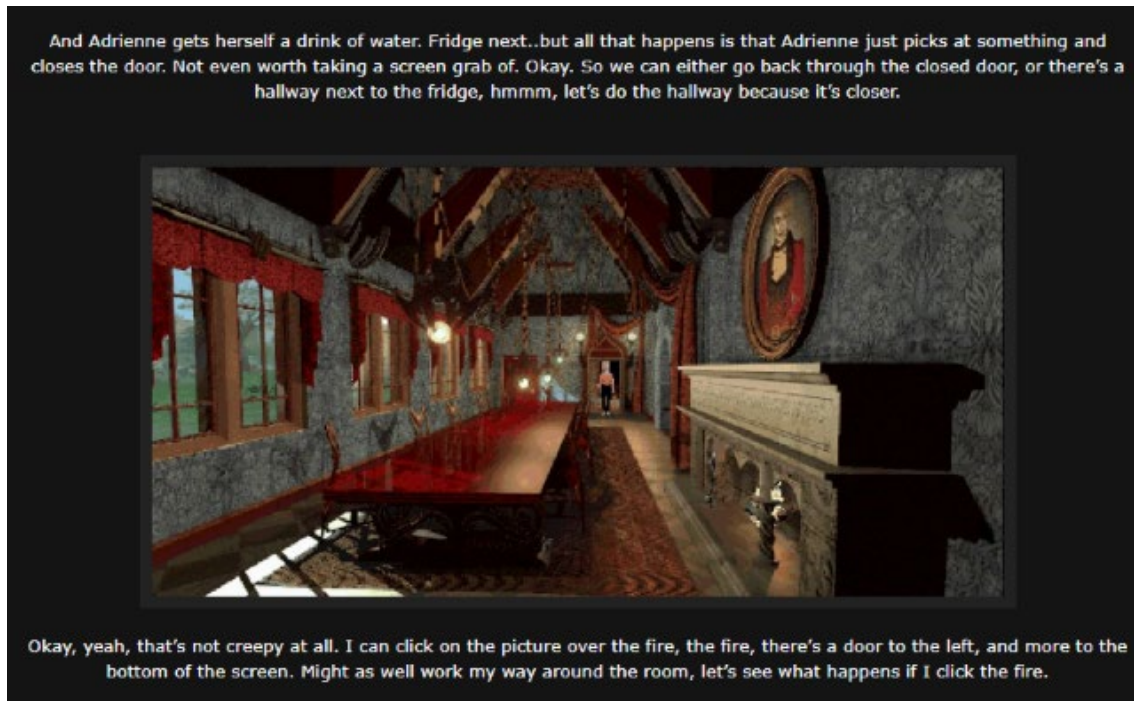


Figure 12: Excerpt from Ensign Ricky - Let's Play Phantasmagoria

After reading through Franklins Let's Play, the style of narration and references to other Let's Plays proved to be important counterparts for the first Let's Play featured in my research. Franklin refers to Antwilers Let's Play on several occasions, and his style of narration is clearly influenced by it, with the profanities and the use of third-person narration to characterize the in-game characters of Phantasmagoria. Even though the game being played is different, it belongs to the same game-series, which leads to several references between the two games in the narration.

Regarding the comparison to live-action Let's Plays, the written versions also provoke different reactions from their audience. As the player-narrator has little means of knowing whether the story will be read or not, they still must reflect with the possible readers. Written Let's Play -stories are still produced today, even though most of the contemporary Let's Plays are uploaded as videos. New written stories appear in The Let's Play Archive every so often³⁶, but their popularity is harder to measure when compared to YouTube videos, which show the number of viewers in real-time.

Then again, it is possible that the roots of written Let's Plays are deeper than the live-action ones. In the first article included in this thesis, I look at the narration of a written Let's Play alongside a live-action one. In addition, I take a quick look at early video game journalism, in which the editors sometimes used different narrative passages to enliven the text. This might have had some effect on the birth of the Let's Play phenomenon. From a historical perspective,

³⁶ See e.g. Advance Wars by cosmicPostman [https://lparchive.org/Advance-Wars-\(by-cosmicPostman\)/](https://lparchive.org/Advance-Wars-(by-cosmicPostman)/) Retrieved 11.11.2019

professional video game journalism emerged at the same time with the television shows. The first magazine regarded as a video game magazine, *Play Meter* (Skybird Publishing 1974–2018) was first published in 1974 and was a trade magazine covering arcade machines for entrepreneurs. The first magazine considered an actual video game magazine, *Computer and Video Games* (Great Britain/Future Publishing 1981–2015), was first published in 1981. (Sigin 2019).

Some of these early video game magazines used a narrative style in walkthroughs and reviews, and thus storified the content in a novel way. Narratively, these writings resemble the narrative style of Let's Plays. One of the earliest examples I have found is from 1981, when in *Computer and Video Games* magazine an unknown reviewer used a subjective style of writing in describing what the experience of playing a game called *The Wizard's Castle* (Joseph R. Power 1980) felt like:

But first you have to decide who – and what – you are. You could be an elf, a dwarf, a hobbit or even a plain old human. For the purposes of this review let's say a hobbit. Having made your decision the next question is "Sex?"

Wizard's Castle programmer immediately won me over here. For when I replied, none too wittily, "Yes please!", the computer responded with: "Cute hobbit, very cute! Now try male or female." Duly chastised I typed in "male".³⁷

Finnish video game magazine *Pelit* (Finland/Sanoma Media Finland/Fokus Media 1992–current) featured articles in the mid-1990s where two of the editors played a turn-based strategy game called *Steel Panthers* (Strategic Simulations Inc. 1995) and wrote about the battles in a novel way. The editors, Kaj Laaksonen and Niko Nirvi, described the actions they took during their turns in a way resembling war diaries or novels, which resulted in a creative kind of an article that, in many ways, could be seen as a contemporary two-player Let's Play (*Pelit* 3/96 pp. 20–23). The difference between this style of writing and a normal strategy guide is easy to point out, as the magazine released a traditional strategy guide to *Steel Panthers* only two issues later. (*Pelit* 5/96 pp. 70–72)

There were walkthroughs and strategy guides written in alternative ways even before that, like the walkthrough of *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!* (Sierra Entertainment 1994) that featured in the same magazine in 1995. In that particular walkthrough, the guide through the game was written in a novel style depicting how the main protagonist would see the adventure unfold. (*Pelit* 2/95 p. 52–53 & *Pelit* 3/95 p.50–51; Figure 5). Sometimes the walkthrough was narrated in a style of a comic, like the walkthrough of *Full Throttle* (LucasArts 1995), in which the solution was narrated with comic-style boxes and even some extra dialogue added to the narration with speech bubbles (*Pelit* 8/95, pp. 54–57). Other magazines used this style too, like *Mean Machines Sega* (Great Britain/EMAP 1992–1997) in The United Kingdom. For example, their reviews of *Streets of Rage 3* (Sega 1993) and *Laughing Salesman* (Compile 1993; Figure 7)

³⁷ *Computer and Video Games*, Issue 001, 1981, p. 90

followed this kind of presentation, while still reviewing the game (Mean Machines Sega, 20/1994 pp. 42 & 72).



Figure 13: Excerpt from Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out! -solution (Pelit 3/1995)



Figure 14: Excerpt from the Laughing Salesman -review, Mean Machines Sega 20/1994

Figures 13 and 14 represent the different styles of narrating the game in 1990s video game journalism. Both styles are very different, but still narrate the actions in a novel way, with a distinct narrator different from the protagonists of the game world, or even the video game reviewer. The style of writing in these articles resembles a lot of modern Let's Play narration. Some elements from Let's Plays are absent, but the way these reviews and guides use alternative narration (Kerttula 2019a, 249–250) when giving the characters in the game world new dialogue or spoofing the game world is very similar to their modern counterparts. One of the main things not found in these texts, however, is reflective narration, as in a magazine, the narrators practicing self-reflection or attempting to reflect the assumed audience would likely not suit their style of storytelling. Then again, when comparing the walkthrough here to the Let's Play of *Phantasmagoria*, it can be seen that the Let's Play would work as a walkthrough as well because the narrator takes the audience through the different actions required in the game.

From a journalistic angle, these reviews and walkthroughs can be considered a creative way of delivering the “video game capital” held by video game journalists (see Consalvo 2007). This means that because the information of upcoming video games and events in the industry is available to journalists before the audience, the journalists have the power to decide when and in which fashion this information is brought onwards. As Nieborg & Sihvonen (2009) note in their article about video game journalism, many video game journalists are amateurs and not professionally angled towards journalism, so in that sense, these creative works are also amateur works (Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009, 1–2).

It is debatable whether modern Let's Play writers have been influenced by these texts or not, as in addition to the few reviews and guides mentioned, there are sure to be a much greater number of articles written in this style all over the world. Even though the similarities are obvious, it would likely be impossible to make sound connections between these two styles of video game narration.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS IN THE INDIVIDUAL ARTICLES

In this chapter I will discuss the articles in the thesis and their main results and findings. Each article presents a different perspective on the phenomena of performing as a player, creating new content from video games and watching other people participate in the act of playing a video game in a live-action representation. The articles are presented in the order of publication. I will discuss how these articles contribute to the culture of video game representation as a whole in the last section of the thesis.

4.1 How The Spooky One and Ensign Ricky narrated the story of a player

In the first article I began to study how players narrate their playing experience in a Let's Play, both in live-action and written format. The aim was to find elements that define Let's Plays and differentiate them from the other types of video game representation. For this study, I analyzed two Let's Plays of Sierra Online's *Phantasmagoria* game series. The first one was a live-action Let's Play of *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh*, made by Noah Antwiler, also known as the Spooky one. The other Let's Play was a written one, uploaded as a blog post by Reg Franklin, or Ensign Ricky as his nickname goes. Maybe this nickname is not a coincidence, as the Urban Dictionary appropriately tells us:

An Ensign Ricky is a character in a movie or television show that goes into battle alongside the main characters.³⁸

The two Let's Players represent different takes on Let's Playing. Antwiler performs the classic Sierra adventure *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* as a live-action series of videos, while Franklin approaches and narrates the game

³⁸ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ensign%20Ricky>

textually. From the narrative that emerges from his text, it becomes obvious, that the starting point and motivation of playing the game is also a bit different.

In the live-action Let's Play of *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh*, Antwiler tells the audience that he has never played the game before, so he has to get accustomed to the game mechanics before embarking on the adventure. The interface is cumbersome, as we learn through the Let's Play and at first not many things seem to make sense. In Franklin's narrative, his inexperience is not as obvious, but it does hint that he is playing *Phantasmagoria* for the first time. However, as the Let's Play goes on, Franklin refers to Antwiler's previous Let's Play, which makes it obvious that the player-narrator has taken influence from this earlier work and even got the idea of Let's Playing this title from the same source.

One important finding from the study was that the narrative and the story of the player shift the focus from the game to the player and the performance. Therefore, a Let's Play is not as much about the game as it is about the narrative. The number of elements present during the narration was also inconsistent. In both cases, descriptive narration was present more at the beginning of the Let's Play as the game mechanics required more narration in the first phases of the games. As the narration moved onwards, the amount of alternative narration grew in the written Let's Play and the amount of reflective narration grew in the live-action Let's Play. While the narrators continued to narrate their actions in the game world in both examples, the growing volume of other narration suggests that the player-narrators started to act more as characters while playing, and, especially in the live-action Let's Play, taking their audience more into the narration.

The caveats of the research material are obvious. As the first article features only two Let's Plays among the plethora of material available online, the results are hard to generalize to the genre of Let's Plays. There are several different styles of writing and performing a Let's Play, but it would have been impossible to feature them all in the research, as the styles evolve and vary throughout the years. The Let's Plays featured are from the early stages of Let's Playing and as the years have passed, people have invented several different styles of narrating a Let's Play. Because of this, the results and the theoretical framework of the study should be tested against more recent Let's Plays to see if there is possibly something else to add or change in the results and the framework. This also applies to the results from the oral history study. Using the oral history gained from Let's Plays as part of a small exhibition manuscript would be beneficial to see, if there is a possibility to move the theory to practice.

4.2 Memories of video games in a Let's Play

As the research of the player stories showed, the player-narrators have many a story to tell about playing video games. One of the most interesting elements was

the way in which the player-narrators incorporated memories surrounding the game into the narration.

From a few different Let's Plays, it became evident that the memories that the player-narrators tell are extremely varied. In the case of old games, the memories can be about the coeval video gaming culture, starting from the moment of buying the game. Some memories also discussed the game packaging and video game magazines, recalling how they got information about the game before the actual purchase.

With this, there was a recognizable oral history found in the narrative of the Let's Plays analyzed, with one distinctive feature: the narration in Let's Plays is not presented as an interview, but rather given voluntarily. The oral history from Let's Plays does not answer any specific questions. Through the tradition of oral history, Let's Plays can be regarded as a method of video game and video game culture preservation, but the spontaneous nature of the narration makes this problematic. It is important to find suitable Let's Plays if we are to use these terms: not all Let's Plays contain oral history and the amount of content online is vast.

The second problem is that even when a Let's Play contains oral history alike discussed in the article, the narration is sporadic. Because of this, the process of finding the desired information is uncertain, and it would take an enormous amount of time. Keeping that in mind, a Let's Play is still an optional form of alternative video game culture preservation, and if it was studied by specifically asking people to play while reminiscing, the results would be more considerable than just by watching random Let's Plays around the internet.

However, as a part of research based on data triangulation, the oral history in Let's Plays can prove to be fruitful. Combining the oral history with, for example, discussions on online forums, video game reviews or marketing material can help with creating an image of the game and the time and culture surrounding it. In this way, the data on a selected game can convey multiple cultural references, but also the information about the player experience and the influence of the game, along with the coeval video game culture with the player.

4.3 Legacy of watching others play and performing as a player

As I was presenting my research at different conferences, in the question phase one specific comment appeared more often than most. When I told people that Let's Plays originated in 2006 at the discussion boards of Something Awful, someone always pointed out that in Japan, a television show called Game Center CX preceded those Let's Plays, starting in 2003 and featured many familiar elements, from which one might recognize a Let's Play.

This raised many questions. Was Game Center CX really the ancestor of the phenomenon? How did the show contribute to the legacy of watching other people play? If we consider Let's Plays as player stories, could there really have been some inspiration from this old television show?

From the dataset itself, a few things became immediately obvious. By looking at the timeline of the shows, it was evident that the number of new television shows decreased significantly at the same time when online video became more popular through YouTube and other services. Most of the shows were produced before 2010, even though many shows continued in production after this point.

Secondly, at the time when Nintendo Entertainment System and Sega Genesis became popular, even more countries around the world started to adopt these types of shows and produce their own. In the 1970s and 1980s, most of the shows were produced in the United States and Japan, with only a couple of exceptions. Among the first countries to start the production were Great Britain, The Netherlands, Spain, Poland and Brazil, all between 1992 and 1993.

More results came up after analyzing the data further with qualitative methods. One of the major findings was that current television shows have started to take inspiration from online shows. *Parker Plays* (Disney Digital Interactive 2017-present) and *Hrajevme s Alim*, along with Conan O'Briens *Clueless Gamer* episodes³⁹ are examples of how player performance, reactions and emotions are much more in the spotlight than the game itself.

This was the case with shows such as Tsurega and more recent Western shows like Dara O'Briain's *Go 8 Bit* and *Parker Plays*. These shows represent the same style of representation and narration as *Let's Plays*, as they narrate the performance of playing a video game in a very similar fashion. Instead of competing in the show, the performance is the main entertainment. The reason for this is that television is competing with the Internet when it comes to advertising money and budget. Television shows need to find their audiences again and this cannot be done with the old formats.

As a conclusion, even though there are traces of the style of a *Let's Play* to be found in these old shows, the shows themselves are cultural products of their own merit. The similarities come from the narration and representation of the player experience, but whereas in *Let's Plays* the player-narrator is able to present larger portions of the chosen game; in the television shows, this was not possible.

T.L. Taylor's recent book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018) discusses the issue of how television shows eventually lost the battle to Internet and live streams, even though, according to Taylor, the rise of reality television is in line with the emergence of online streaming and videos (Taylor 2018, 30–32). The quantitative data collected from the television shows supports Taylor's results from the era, as it can be clearly seen that the late 2000s saw a huge decrease in the number of television shows being broadcast worldwide.

As mentioned in chapters 3.1 and 3.2, the early shows can be connected to the emergence of competitive gaming. The research, however, showed that during the 1990s, competitive video gaming was already happening, but the

³⁹ See e.g. "Conan O'Brien Reviews "Grand Theft Auto V" | Clueless Gamer | Conan on TBS" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB_XX_IM8io Retrieved 25.10.2019

coverage of these events was minimal. The television shows rarely featured footage from these events and the competitions were advertised through posters, articles and advertisements in video game magazines (Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018, 7 & 10–28). Following the two most remarkable – for the time – video game tournaments broadcasted in television, *That’s Incredible! Video Game Challenge* and *Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge*⁴⁰, introduced competitive gaming as something different from the gameshows of the time, video game tournaments were absent from the television for over a decade.

As Taylor (2012) mentions, the commentary heard in these episodes, during those early tournaments, was probably considered by production companies and other institutions involved as indicative of the future of the merging of sports and video games (Taylor 2012, *ibid.*). eSports broadcasting started to emerge again in the late 1990s and in 2000, as in South Korea the popularity of *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) led to two new cable channels, OGN (On-media, 2000-current) and MBC Game (MBC Plus Media 2000-2012), which broadcast only eSports-tournaments. After that point, eSports-shows started to appear also in the Western world.⁴¹

My research contributes to the field of research in eSports-history by bringing these early television shows and institutions into the larger frame of competitive gaming around the world. Most of the earlier research focuses only on the emergence of competitive gaming and the media representations of it in The United States. While the results confirm that the origins of the phenomenon are indeed in the USA and in Japan, the worldwide frame shows how competitive gaming was seen and treated globally in live-action media following these early iterations.

4.4 The spectacle of video game

When I was visiting the *Corsair Dreamhack Masters* tournament in Stockholm in August 2018, I instantly felt like I was witnessing a big sports spectacle. It was not just the staging or the venue, The Globen. It was the audience and the commentary. All the merchandise for the competing teams was present wherever my head turned; I was surrounded by fan culture. As seen in Figure 15, there were the Finnish, Swedish and Danish national flags. Some Nordic fans were even dressed up in Viking outfits, like the kind one might see at an ice hockey match.

⁴⁰ See Ch. 4.4.

⁴¹ See Ch. 2.4.

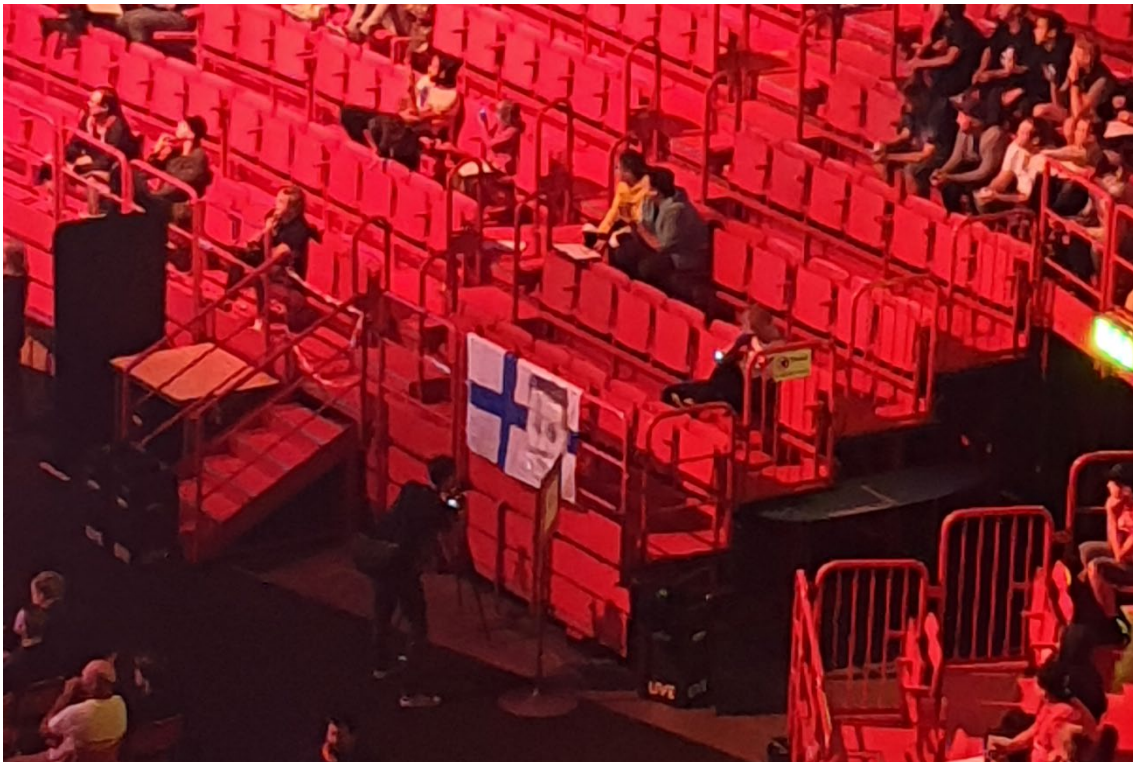


Figure 15: Finnish flag in the audience of Dreamhack Stockholm 2018

The Swedish team Ninjas in Pyjamas originates from Stockholm, which the announcer made very clear at every possible turn:

“Stockholm, are you ready for your own boys, Ninjas in Pyjamas?”⁴²

Stockholm was ready. The crowd exploded into wild cheers every time their Counter-Strike heroes were on stage. I had never seen anything like that for a video game. However, was it about the game itself or the performance?

I looked at this angle through the first televised video game tournaments in the 1990s. *That's Incredible Video Game Challenge* and *Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge* can be regarded as official tournaments, as the first episode served as the final for the North American Video Game Olympics, while the United States Video Game Team officially endorsed the latter, offering a spot on the team to the competition winner.

Comparison of the coeval literature revealed that the technology needed to create a sufficient sports spectacle in television was first available to producers in the 1970s. The rulesets of both video game tournaments took influence from the world of sports, as the aim was to race through the track as fast as possible while achieving given goals before running to another arcade cabinet. Therefore, the presentation in the episodes focused on the performance instead of the games, even though it could be argued that their original purpose was to promote and

⁴² Dreamhack Masters Stockholm, August 2018

market the games. When analyzing the visual representation of the video game tournaments and comparing them to the sports broadcasts in 1980s and 1990s, several visual similarities became evident. As the screen was divided into several different sections to show the emotion of the player, the score, and the events going on in the game, while at the same time giving the spectators home a peek at the live audience on the set, the tournaments became sports spectacles.

Viewing this through the lens of spectacle creates an interesting contradiction. The episodes clearly wanted to use spectacle as a vessel to market the games, but instead they managed to market the player performance. Comparing the episodes to the 1989 road-movie *The Wizard* (Universal/Todd Holland) makes this contradiction clear, as the story of the movie was tied in with plenty of obvious product placement for Nintendo, and even though the focus of the movie is superficially on the characters playing the games, the products steal the show. This is the case in most scenes of the movie, where the action and dialogue revolves around different Nintendo Entertainment System games and accessories, such as the Power Glove.

It is obvious that production companies wanted to make a profit from the popularity of arcades and video games. The shows after these early tournaments were heavily commercialized and the prizes on offer were games and video game consoles from the sponsors of the shows. The advertisements between the shows were also very obviously targeted at the young video game audience. With the rise of YouTube and online streaming, however, the popularity of these shows diminished and very few shows have made it to production in the last ten years.

To further evaluate the commercial aspects of the eSports spectacle today, it still does not market the games as such, but rather the peripherals related to gaming and the lifestyle of an eSports athlete. Modern eSports broadcasts are visually very similar to sports, as the player performance is the focus and the commercialism revolves around the action in the form of product placement and sponsorships. In the early shows, this probably was not intentional, but the similarities between the modern and old styles of broadcasting competitive video gaming are evident.

5 DISCUSSIONS

The research results from the articles are varied, discussing the topics presented in this dissertation from several different angles. Because of this, it is necessary to put them all together to discuss what the results tell of the phenomenon of representing video game play in live-action media as a whole.

From the narrative analysis, the narrative features of a Let's Play became clear. The player-narrator is the most important set piece in the videos and is essential for us to be able to call the videos Let's Plays. Therefore, the earlier television shows cannot accurately be called the ancestors of the Let's Play, as the narration is different. The television shows, such as Game Center CX, as well as the narrated reviews and walkthroughs in video game journalism, might have been an inspirational point in the emergence of the Let's Play as a phenomenon. However, because it is impossible to point out what sort of video game media each Let's Player followed before starting to make stories and videos, the connection is loose and hard to confirm.

The strongest connection between the different research results in each of the articles is the performance, or rather the will to perform as a player, in the visual media. In the early days, distributing one's video game performance or playing in a live television show meant resorting to a lucky draw for the television shows or sending high scores into the magazines. As mentioned in the introduction, recording footage of gameplay was not unusual even in the early ages of video games, but with the invention of ever faster Internet connections, the ability to share these videos and perform as a player became available to anyone. When looking at the timelines of the television shows, it becomes obvious that while the number of the professional television productions was decreasing, online culture was on a rapid rise. James Rolfe (The Angry Video Game Nerd) started producing his now popular online videos in 2004 and was one of the earliest producers online. During the period of 2004-2008, many more internet personalities emerged, such as The Spooky One.

While the starting point of studying the history of the television shows began with the question of whether Game Center CX was the originator of Let's Plays, in light of this research it is clear that the phenomenon has roots actually

even deeper than this television shows from the 2000s. While it became evident that these television shows started to take influence from online shows after the millennium, that happened after the amateur works became popular around 2010. In fact, if we look at speedrunning and machinima, their origins are, in my opinion, more likely to be found in the amateur productions that used video games as a method of self-expression.

This line of thought, especially considering competitive gaming, could go even deeper, though. Speedrunning is an online phenomenon that undeniably has its roots in *Doom* and *Quake*; by looking at the early video game competitions and competitive television shows, the similarities in the competitions are quite close to modern speedrunning. After all, one of the earliest speedrun games, *Dragster* on Atari 2600, was inspired by the developers themselves with the endorsement of sending a recording of a high score to the Twin Galaxies scoreboards. From this point of view, speedrunning as an amateur activity contributes more to the history and emergence of professional competitive gaming than Let's Plays.

If we return to the emergence of Let's Plays and other narrative amateur productions, looking at the evolution of the aforementioned television shows, one rather interesting detail comes up when considering the changes that television productions underwent in the 2000s. The dataset shows how the appearance of different reality and lifestyle television shows also affected the video game shows. In contrast to game show hosts, audiences were given "real" people in shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. In the video game shows, this trend is obvious in shows such as *Subido*, *Tsurega* and many other shows from the era, where people were invited to the studio to react to different video games while also talking about other subjects. Looking at the narrative style in Let's Plays, with their reflecting of the self and the memories of the video game experiences that come into it, I am claiming that the amateur productions are, in fact, a result of these professional reality productions, and do not necessarily stem from the video game world. People started to make video game reality shows of their own.

Moreover, as a matter of fact, reality shows also affected competitive gaming. Looking at early 2000s competitive shows such as *Arena*, there is a hint of the reality show in there, especially in how the teams featured in the shows appeared across multiple episodes. Of course, there are traces of competitive gaming in some shows from the 1990s, mainly *Games World*. Nevertheless, the changes in the television productions could have their footprint also in this side.

If we add the results from the spectacle research to all of this, it is clear that the early video game tournaments have their place in history in relation to how video games were perceived and represented in the media then and now. When comparing the attempt to represent video games in a spectacular fashion in the early television shows against amateur representations and the competitive gaming of today, it is obvious that the performance is the spectacle instead of the video games. Even though watching a Let's Play of a modern game might make the audience want to buy the game themselves, the player-narrator still steals the

show and is quite probably the main reason why people are watching. In competitive gaming, it cannot be denied that the events are sports spectacles, which are used to market things other than the game itself.

The research shows that the live-action representations of video gaming have become a way of self-expression in many ways. Let's Plays and other more narrative-centric videos make people approach the game from their own perspectives, or, in some cases, from the perspective of a fictional persona. The narration adds the layers of video game experience and memories to the game. When looking at the competitive aspects, however, the self-expression is different. Speedrunning and eSports are both ways of self-expression by displaying talent. No matter how the whole phenomenon is looked at, the will to perform, create, educate, and entertain via video game footage is essential to each type of representation discussed in this study.

5.1 Review of the research questions

As the research questions in this study differ from the research questions in the individual articles, this short chapter provides answers to the research questions provided in the chapter 1.1.

RQ1) What are the characteristics of a media spectacle in different types of live-action presentations of video game play?

The characteristics of the media spectacle have varied throughout the decades. In the first television shows in the 1980s, the primary purpose of the spectacle was to advertise the games. This can be seen in the presentation, where the games are being presented as something new, "cool" and spectacular. It can also be argued, that via the spectacle, the aim was to domesticate playing video games. This applies especially to the shows, where the presented games were played on home computers and video game consoles. Through the domestication, it is probable, that the spectacular ways of presenting video games were also used to commodify video game play in arcades and homes.

In the earlier shows, the spectacle comes through presentation similar to sport broadcasting. From the late 1980s to early 2000s, the style leans more towards reality and game shows, as the way of presenting video games is not as competitive and sportified as earlier. Although the commercial aspects of the spectacle are present in the media spectacle of video game play throughout the timeline, in the later years the television shows and online videos started to market a "video game lifestyle" with the different uses of studio environments and commercials from video game peripheral companies.

Individual video game YouTubers and some video game communities, such as speedrunners, have also seemingly adopted this way of lifestyle promotion, bringing forward political views and attitudes through the videos. In my research material, there does not seem to be that much of nationalistic

purposes within the spectacle. In internet, there are a couple of ways, through which the promotion of the lifestyle comes through. A most distinct one is the narration and personality of the YouTuber. As a YouTuber can make his/her own narrative content from the original video game content, the persona narrating the story affects the ways the story is perceived – and liked. If the narration is funny or creative, the message could be better received.

The aspect of power is present in each type of the presentations and is also probably the most varied one. In the professional television broadcasts, the spectacle upkeeps the power of the media companies and the video game companies in comparison to their competitors. As some of the tournaments and shows were sponsored by certain video game competitions, they managed to gain a commercial foothold over their competitors with the coverage.

RQ2) How does the media spectacle affect the presentation of video game play?

An interesting finding regarding the second research question, is how the aspect of real in the spectacle affected and still affects the presentation of video game play. Even in the 1980's the spectacle needed to look real to the audience, as the promotion and marketing of the video games presented in the television shows required that playing the games looked fun and interesting. Because the early shows incorporated stylistic choices from 1970's sport spectacles, the element of reality became a part of the presentation, therefore making the action of playing the games look as real as possible.

Because of these choices, the focus was more on the player rather than the game. Through this, the early shows ended up promoting the player – later even a whole video game lifestyle – along with the games. The aspect of the player being a part of the presentation can still be seen today, where the player can be in fact an even more important factor in the presentation than the game. This is because the narration and the personality of the player create new entertainment and spectacles from the video game content.

The promotion of the video game lifestyle through the spectacle can also be problematic, as these political views can be quite controversial, and the video game companies have no say in which kind of videos the games are being presented. It is arguable whether negative publicity affects the reputation of the game or not, as from the research material it seems, that because the player-narrator is in a bigger role in the presentation than the game, the negative publicity would because of this affect more the persona than the game.

In current age, powers behind the spectacle are more varied. Along with the commercial actors, such as the video game companies and video/streaming platforms like YouTube and Twitch, a certain amount of the power is now on the producers. As the individual, amateur or professional, video producers are dependent on their subscribers and random audience financially, it could be more important to them to answer more to the audience than the companies behind the games and platforms. As mentioned before, the video game companies cannot affect the ways individual online personalities treat their

games, which from my point of view shifts the power from these companies more towards the producers and platform holders.

RQ3) How has broadcasting video game play evolved from its origins?

The biggest evolutionary step is the movement from television broadcasts to different modes of online videos. This has also affected the ways of producing video game -related video content. As the television broadcasts are professional productions, in the online videos the border between an amateur production and a professional one can be hard to see.

This results in a more varied field of presenting video games than before. As before the television channels had their own distinct style behind the productions and also the values of the broadcasters, today an amateur production can look as professional as the productions from bigger companies or individual professionals. The individual producers bring more and more their own personality behind the productions and with enough likable personality, the individuals can become celebrities. This means that the individual producers are now competing against the bigger companies and the media companies have as a result started to adopt styles of presentation from the individual producers, while the individual actors are adopting styles more from others, instead of the media companies.

The scene of competitive play is an exception of kind. As the early tournaments adopted styles of presenting the action from the world of sports, these styles are still used today, although in a more modern format. Competitive play needs to look like a sport and the elements of presentation from the sports world are still present in the eSports broadcasts.

5.2 Possible directions for future studies

During the study, many possible directions for future studies came up, but were difficult to include in the framework of this research. In this chapter I will present and explain some of these possible directions.

5.2.1 Video gaming as lifestyle and sports

Cecilia D'Anastasio (2019) recently wrote an article about the financial bubble of electronic sports. The amount of money poured into the world of eSports is vast, and the investors are sure to draw their money from the sport in the near future, possibly leading to lesser amounts of money pouring into the tournament pools and possibly even to the end of the sport completely (D'Anastasio 2019). While it is possible that this could happen, the loss of an entire sport industry is, in my opinion, not probable, because the culture of representing video games in live-action is more diverse. I will make the argument that recorded amateur productions and electronic sports intertwine in a peculiar way.

When comparing the history of video gaming to, for example, the history of skateboarding, there are a lot of similarities to be found. Skateboarding, now an Olympic sport, has come a long way since its emergence in the 1940s, and the culture surrounding it shares many elements with many other sports that fit under the moniker of lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2004, 1-4). These sports include snowboarding, extreme bicycle sports, frisbee sports and, from my perspective, video gaming. These sports are not only competitive, but also a way of self-expression and thus a way of life.

As skateboarding made its second big cultural appearance in the 1970s after the first wave in the 1940s and 1950s, more and more money started pouring into the scene. The photoshoots for Skateboarder magazine are depicted in Stacy Peralta's documentary "Dogtown and the Z-Boys" (The United States, 2001) and Steve Cave's article about the same Z-Boys (Cave 2018). The first competitions started to happen in the mid-1970s, but at the same time professional skateboarding seemed to be more about commercialism and posing in the magazines than competing.

Researcher Becky Beal has looked closer into the culture of skateboarding. According to Beal (1995 & 2003), there was a strong resistance among skateboarders towards the institutionalization of skateboarding and the competitions. Among the skateboarding community, there were opinions about skateboarding not being a sport, as the main point was not to compete against anyone but yourself. The skateboarders saw making the tricks and impressing the audience as being more important than a contest bound by rules. (Beal 1995, 257-259; Beal & Wideman 2003, 338-340).

As the 1980s came along, one certain visual media overtook the photoshoots in the magazines - video. Skateboarding manufacturers started to realize the potential of shooting live-action footage of the sport and selling the videos to the community. In time, technology got cheaper, and skateboarders were soon able to shoot their own skateboarding movies. Because skateboarding is a visual sport, the videos were a great way of showing off the skills, and because of this, videos became an integral part of the skateboarding culture during the 1980s. Far from being just a way for skateboarders to show off, these videos are still a way to communicate and teach inside the skateboarding community (Beal 2013, 23-24 & 97-99). Skateboarding has come and gone many times during the last few decades⁴³, but the culture has still been around and has evolved despite the occasional declines in popularity.

This evolution is very much comparable to the evolution of video game videos. Currently we have the institutionalized competitive gaming on one side, and on the other, there are Let's Plays and other non-competitive videos that have different purposes. Much like in skateboarding, gamers have also found themselves arguing over whether gaming should be a professional sport or just a recreational activity (Taylor 2012, 132-133). In addition, the technology required for recording the video game footage became cheaper and cheaper

⁴³ e.g. Kathie Fry - Skateboarding History
<http://www.skatelog.com/skateboarding/skateboarding-history.htm>

during the 2000s, making this kind of self-expression available to an increasing number of gamers (Kerttula 2014, 82–83).

Performing as a gamer has become just as integral a part of video gaming culture as performing and recording tricks is in skateboarding. Whether Let's Playing or digital athletics, live-action footage of video gaming serves many a purpose inside the culture. Showing off your skills in the form of a speedrun, teaching other players to play through tutorials and walkthroughs, telling your own gamer story through vlogs and Let's Plays or performing as a digital athlete in front of millions of viewers: the possibilities are endless. Therefore, I argue that just like skateboarding, video gaming as a performance is not entirely bound by commercialism and is not going anywhere.

As the live-action performance of video gaming went into two different directions, both forms would likely not exist without each other. Culturally, I dare to say that professional competitive gaming feeds on amateur recordings and vice versa. The performance of someone gaming and learning through others is integral and unifies the gaming community in its own way. This angle of a non-professional and recreational way of expressing video gaming as a lifestyle is one that requires further research.

5.2.2 The amount of viewers online and in television

These days the number of viewers for each type of video game videos is easy to evaluate, as YouTube and Twitch keep track of amounts of views along the videos posted to the sites. By looking at the individual producers mentioned in this dissertation, the number of viewers can be seen even before watching the video. For example, James Rolfe's two main projects, Angry Video Game Nerd and James and Mike Mondays gathered 1.6 million views in three weeks (AVGN) and 234,000 views in six days (James and Mike Mondays). eSports gathers even bigger audiences around the world. According to video game and eSports analytics company Newzoo, in 2018 the total number of eSports-viewers was 395 million individuals, of which 173 million viewers were considered eSports enthusiasts, with the rest being occasional viewers. Newzoo estimates that in 2022, the total number of viewers could amount to 645 million viewers, of which 297 million viewers would be enthusiasts.⁴⁴

Obviously, the number of viewers is also a measurement of success, as many YouTubers and streamers do not gather these humongous audiences, but still continue producing material. For example, the Pelataanpa! videos featured in my second article only gather some hundreds of views per video and even the channel V2.fi has only 1,500 subscribers.⁴⁵ As the number of producers online is vast, the smaller number of viewers support my earlier view of producing video game footage as a lifestyle, because despite the low ratings, many producers still put out multiple videos.

⁴⁴ <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoo-global-esports-economy-will-top-1-billion-for-the-first-time-in-2019> Retrieved 8.1.2020

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/v2fi/featured> Retrieved 8.1.2020

Looking back to the viewer ratings of the professionally produced television shows could be an interesting and important comparison. However, it is sadly not as simple as it is in the case of the online content. *That's Incredible!* premiered on ABC on March 17th, 1980. The show lasted for a little over four years, going off the broadcast on February 27th, 1984. *Incredible Sunday* was an attempt to revive the series. It premiered on ABC on October 9th, 1988 and lasted for only one season, with the final of the 16 episodes broadcasted on February 5th, 1989.

The main idea of both shows was to discuss new, interesting or obscure events in the USA and abroad, and to show them in a spectacular fashion. By watching the shows, it is easy to see that the production team aimed at a sense of wonder, no matter the subject. In other words, the show did not focus on video games other than in the special episodes. In the 1980s, it is quite clear that video games, especially video game tournaments, were a perfect fit for the show.

ABC aired both shows in prime-time television. *That's Incredible* was aired on Mondays at 8:30PM, while *Incredible Sunday* aired on Sundays at 7PM. A reliable source on the viewer ratings (known as the Nielsen ratings) of the shows is hard to find, but according to Classic TV Database⁴⁶ & ClassicTVHits.com⁴⁷ *That's Incredible* reached nearly 20 million viewers in its first season. Throughout the series the number of viewers declined, however. In the last season, which aired across 1983 and 1984, the show dropped from Nielsen ratings' Top 30 list, meaning it did not reach the 14.2 million viewers required to rank. *Incredible Sunday* never made it to that same list, failing to reach at least 13.9 million viewers in its only season.

Because the Nielsen ratings of the shows not included in the Top 30 list are not available, it is hard to tell exactly how many viewers could have seen these episodes. By looking at the previous ratings, it is highly likely that the number of viewers was still counted in millions. Considering these television shows, the aspect of viewer ratings is an important one. The ratings data would make it possible to analyze the shows from multiple different angles and give information on shows that were presumably cancelled at the peak of their fame and possible similar tendencies in the viewer ratings globally. The answers to these kinds of questions would give the history of the shows even more much-needed depth. The problem with many of these television shows is that the viewer ratings from 1980s and 1990s are hard to get. This data would also complement the qualitative data I have already gathered and make future qualitative analysis of it easier and deeper.

5.2.3 Further evaluation of oral history

As the article regarding oral history featured only *Let's Plays* from one player-narrator in one specific style, the possibilities of oral history and preservation

⁴⁶ <http://www.classic-tv.com/features/ratings/1979-1980-tv-show-ratings> Retrieved 8.1.2020

⁴⁷ <http://classictvhits.com/tvratings/1979.htm> Retrieved 8.1.2020

needs to be evaluated further. Let's Plays are not the only videos that feature oral history, nor narrated connections between the game and coeval time and culture. Many YouTube reviewers do this kind of narration in their videos, especially when the reviewed game is old. One good example of this is *Lazy Game Reviews*, hosted by Clint Basinger. Basinger's reviews feature multiple references to the time the reviewed game came out, also with insights into his personal experiences with the game:

It was Christmas time in 1993 and there I was, just about to turn seven years old and thoroughly transfixed by anything CPU-insighted. And luckily the household my family was visiting for a Christmas party had a shiny new 486 in their office. The guy who owned the computer was browsing and showing games he downloaded from the local BBS, like Halloween Harry and other platformers. Then something happened that changed my entire perception of video games; I saw this: [Shows footage from Doom].⁴⁸

This kind of insight into the game and time could be valuable information for exhibition manuscripts and other game preservation types. This is because the narration features stories surrounding the game, rather than those focused on the game itself. The computers the games were played on, the culture of shareware and early BBSs, visiting other households and being introduced to new games: this is the type of information that can, when connecting the results with other research methods, help to give us a clearer picture of the game and of video game culture of the time.

The style of narration differentiates these videos from more fact-driven history videos, such as from *The Gaming Historian*⁴⁹ and *DaveControl*⁵⁰. Even though some of the historically oriented YouTubers do sometimes add their own experiences with the presented subject, in many cases they only narrate the events of history and leave their own subjective experiences out.

Because of this, the value of oral history in Let's Plays as a method of video game preservation is also an interesting question, especially when compared to other possible visual methods. For example, longplays⁵¹ can feature more complete and cohesive footage from a video game, but without a narrator. When comparing longplays to the way YouTubers like PewDiePie⁵² and Lakko⁵³ narrate their LPs and edit the footage to create a humorous compilation of gameplay imagery, the latter sets the game in a different perspective from the angle of gameplay. How much the inclusion of the narrator adds to the experience and what the role of the recorded footage as a means of preservation

⁴⁸ DOOM – Still Excellent 25 Years Later! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bl33_I3B-s&t= Retrieved 21.8.2019

⁴⁹ Gaming Historian – Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/user/mcfrosticles> Retrieved 4.11.2019

⁵⁰ DaveControl – Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/user/DaveControlLive> Retrieved 4.11.2019

⁵¹ See Ch. 3.3.

⁵² PewDiePie – YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie> Retrieved 4.11.2019

⁵³ Lakko – YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/CoDTupakkalakko> Retrieved 4.11.2019

is are questions that should be taken into account more than was possible in this research.

5.2.4 Other future studies

Without interview data, it is difficult to determine the will to perform as a player in the public. This kind of study should be done with all kinds of YouTubers and other professionals, including eSports and speedrunning. In addition, the possible influences of the past would be possible to determine by means of interviews.

The television show data needs also more qualitative and quantitative studies. The representation of video games in the 1990s and the culture and form of the more journalistic shows, compared against the gamified shows, is an angle, which could be examined more closely. With more complete qualitative studies from that era, the decreased number of the television shows and the part of video game culture, where watching these shows will come more into light.

There is also potential to evaluate the concepts even further. The concept of representation considering the video game play is especially a one angle to study further. The results of this study should also be tested further in coming studies. Especially considering the narrative framework, it should be applied to a larger base of different materials to prove it cohesive.

6 CONCLUSION

When looked at as spectacles, the live-action presentations of video game play reveal many different aspects from the video game culture and communities. Even though the commercial aspects are the easiest ones to see, there are also traces of inclusivity⁵⁴ within community and different problems related to the celebrity status of YouTubers today. One interesting notice is that the video game companies have only a little control over the YouTubers, thus giving the power of the spectacle to the creators. From many perspectives, this could have many different outcomes: as the game is subordinate to different political views and attitudes of the YouTuber, the game could be presented in a favorable or a difficult way, depending on the opinions.

As the audience, we are constantly subject to the media spectacle. Whichever a way a game might be presented, there is a spectacular aspect to the presentation: be that the skill of the player, flashy surroundings and effects, or an insight into a certain community. The activity of playing video games has been brought to us during the decades in a form of the supposed real. We cannot be certain whether the activity on screen was scripted beforehand or not; the aspect of the supposed real here is important from the viewpoint of commercialism. The activity needs to look real and most of all, it needs to look fun, fascinating and desirable. To achieve this, the influence of athletic presentations, mainly sports broadcasts in fascinating, as all kinds of representations of play have been influenced by them.

From the several viewpoints taken in the articles, one thing became obvious: the representation of video games in live-action media changed drastically towards the last years of the 2000s. The focus of the action was not so much on representing the game or even representing the action of playing a video game, but rather on the *performance* of playing a video game. I am arguing that at that point, the presentation went into two different directions. One direction was the Let's Plays and other styles of performative gaming, where the player-narrator

⁵⁴ see Ch. 3.3

or the performer took the focus away from the game by changing the narrative. The other direction was electronic sports and competitive gaming.

These two directions differ from each other in various ways. In competitive gaming, the performance is more athletic and highlights sports-like skills such as teamwork and optimizing player performance. Therefore, in eSports, the presentation of play also puts the focus more on athletic performance. In Let's Plays and other more creative ways of presenting play, the performance can demonstrate various other skills rather than succeeding in the game efficiently. From the results of this dissertation, such skills are creating a story and transforming existing material to new and different media content. In the middle stands speedrunning, which incorporates elements from both of these worlds, depending on the type of representation and action being examined. Laid-back speedrunning in marathons and other events has much in common with Let's Plays, whereas grinding for the fastest time possible is much more aligned towards the style of eSports, from the angle of performance. Performative gaming started as amateur productions and the majority of Let's Plays are still made by amateurs. As the research shows, even Let's Playing has started to move towards a more professional direction, due to the increasing number of viewers and advertising through YouTube.

Competitive gaming, however, is taking more and more influence from the world of sports, to the point where the discussion of whether eSports should be called sports in the first place is carried out from multiple different angles, ranging from the physical activity to the representations of it in media. Through my research, it is obvious that from the viewpoint of production and audience, there should be no question about eSports being sports, but the other arguments, such as the viewpoint of physical activity, are certainly worth acknowledging.

Even though the study provided some conclusive results, it also raises many questions that should be addressed in future studies. Most of them I will discuss in the articles provided in this study, but it needs to be noted that the relationship between original television productions and the video game presentations, in particular, should definitely be further examined under a magnifying glass.

This is because while my research material used in the study was comprehensive from a few different angles, some angles were also intentionally left for the future. As an example, the gathering of a timeline showing the emergence of certain online productions and representations would prove to be very valuable when put against the timeline of the television shows.

In the end, there is no denying it: performative video gaming is here to stay and will probably grow further in directions that are impossible to predict. Video games are much more than just games, more than just a hobby or form of entertainment, today. They are a way of competition, a way of telling stories, a way of showing off skills, and a way of performance and a presentation of one's self. In brief, these days more than ever, video games are a way of life.

FINNISH SUMMARY

Tässä tutkimuksessa käsitellään videopeliihneiden mediatuotantojen kehityskaarta ja merkitystä osana videopelikulttuuria. Tutkimus käsittää televisio-ohjelmien lisäksi modernit verkkotuotannot, kuten Let's Playt ja kilpapelamisen, sekä myös painetun journalismin julkaisut ja muut kirjoitetut tuotokset.

Tutkimus alkoi keskittymällä nimen omaisesti Let's Play -videoihin, jotka ovat pelaajien itsensä tekemiä tarinoita pelamisesta. Kuitenkin projektin alkuvaiheessa aiheesta oli tarjolla tutkimusta varsin vähän, minkä vuoksi ilmiötä tuli tarkistella myös historiallisesta kontekstista. Tämä puolestaan johti tutkimuksen laajentumiseen televisio-ohjelmiin ja niiden kautta kilpapelamiseen.

Johdanto-osiossa tarkastelen ilmiötä mediaspektaakkelin käsitteen kautta. Spektaakkelin avulla tutkimuksessa käsiteltävät mediatuotteet luovat tietynlaista todellisuuden kuvaa, jossa esillä ovat pelaajat, peli, sekä muu tuotantoon kuuluva ympäristö ja henkilöstö. Luodulla todellisuudella on lähtökohdaisesti näiden mediaspektaakkeliin kohdalla tarkoituksensa – saada kuvissa näkyvä peli näyttämään houkuttelevalta ja ostamisen arvoiselta.

Koska produktioissa käytettävät visuaaliset keinot ovat kuitenkin monin tavoin samankaltaisia kuin urheilulähetyksissä, itse pelin sijaan kuvan keskiöön nousee pelaaja. Tämän vuoksi etenkin varhaiset televisio-ohjelmat loivat pohjaa sille, millaisena näemme peleihin liittyvät videotuotannot nykyään. Pelaaja ja pelaajan reaktiot peliä kohtaan ovat oma spektaakkeliinsa ja itse peli on tuotannon väline. Erityisesti kilpapelamista tarkastellessa voidaan huomata, kuinka urheilulähetyksissä nähdyt keinot luovat pelatusta pelistä urheilulajin.

Väitöskirjaan liitetyt artikkelit tutkivat ilmiötä eri näkökulmista. Ensimmäisessä artikkelissa tarkastelen Let's Play -videoiden kerrontatapoja ja sitä, millainen rooli pelaajalla on näissä tarinoissa kertojana. Artikkelit erittelee seitsemän erilaista kerronnallista elementtiä, joiden kautta tarina pelin kulusta koostuu. Tässä artikkelissa esittelen pelaajan roolin myös pelaajakertojana, sillä erityisesti videoiden aikana tapahtuva kerronta on spontaania. Artikkelissa käsitellään myös kirjoitettuja Let's Play -tarinoita, jotka ovat luonteeltaan harkitumpia. Vaikka nämä tarinat eivät olekaan yhtä spontaaneja kuin videoidut tarinat, ne sisältävät silti samat kerronnalliset elementit. Tämän tutkimuksen jatkona väitöskirjaan liitetty toinen artikkeli käsittelee Let's Play -kerrontaa muistitietona. Artikkelissa havaitaan, että Let's Play- videoiden käyttö tutkimustarkoituksessa muistitietomenetelmän on mahdollista, sillä videoiden kerronta on spontaania ja erityisesti historiallisissa videoissa sisältää usein muistelukerrontaa. Kaikki vanhoja pelejä käsittelevät Let's Playt eivät kuitenkaan tällaista kerrontaa sisällä, joten oikeanlaisten videoiden löytäminen voi osoittautua haastavaksi.

Kolmannen artikkelin myötä tutkimus suuntautui enemmän pelivideoiden historian ja kilpapelamisen suuntaan. Tässä artikkelissa tutkitaan 1970-1990 -lukujen pelejä käsitteleviä televisio-ohjelmia, sekä niiden tyyliä suhteessa moderneihin videoproduktioihin. Tutkimuksessa huomattiin, että varhaisten peliohjelmien tyyli muistuttaa monilta osin urheilulähetyksen tyyliä, erityisesti kuvakulmien ja tehosteiden käytön osalta. Samalla myös jo näissä ohjelmissa

pelaaja ja pelikokemus nousevat kuvan keskiöön, jättäen itse pelin välineen rooliin. Tietynlaisia tapoja kertoa ja kerronnallistaa pelikokemusta ovat myös osittain peräisin varhaiselta aikakaudelta. Neljännessä artikkelissa televisio-ohjelmien ja kilpapelaamisen suhdetta syvennetään tarkastelemalla näitä speaktaakkelin näkökulmasta. Kilpapelitapahtumat ovat varhaisten peliohjelmien tapaan kaupallisia mediaspektaakkeleita, jotka pyrkivät markkinoinaan ruudussa näkyviä pelituotteita kilpailullisen pelikokemuksen välittymisen avulla. Modernien kilpapelilähetysten tyyli on kehittynyt peliohjelmien kautta, samalla urheilun tyylikeinoja mukaan ottaen. Näin ollen kilpapelilähetyksissä peleistä tulee urheilulaji ja pelaajista urheilijoita. Tämä myös vaikuttaa siihen, millaisina kilpapelilähetykset nähdään.

Kaikkea yhdessä mediaspektaakkelin näkökulmasta tarkastellen, yksi asia on selkeää: pelaajan rooli kertojana, pelaajana tai urheilijana on nykyään oleellinen osa pelaamisen kulttuuria ja usein jopa tärkeämpi osanen kuin peli itse. Oman pelaamisen videointi ja jakaminen kuuluu merkittävänä osana peliharrastukseen ja on verrattavissa esimerkiksi rullalautailuun, jossa myös videoilla on lajikulttuurissa tärkeä rooli. Tunnetuimmat pelaajat ovat merkittäviä julkisuuden henkilöitä, joiden sanalla on katsojilleen arvoa. Tämän vuoksi speaktaakkeliin liittyy myös hahmon näkökulma, sillä pelaajalla on tietty valta välittää tietoa yleisölleen.

On myös huomattavaa, että etenkin urheilun piirissä speaktaakkeli on nykyään läpinäkyvämpi kuin ennen. Tämä on havaittu erityisesti Qatarin ja Valko-Venäjän urheilutapahtumien kohdalla, jotka ovat saaneet kritiikkiä – ja Valko-Venäjällä myös peruuntuneet – maiden ihmisoikeustilanteen vuoksi ja kuinka näitä epäkohtia pyritään urheiluspektaakkelin kohdalla peittelemään. Pelaajien kohdalla speaktaakkelin läpinäkyvyys voi aiheuttaa suosion laskua katsojien joukossa, mikäli henkilö jakaa videoillaan ristiriitaisia poliittisia näkökulmia.

Aivan kaikki ei kuitenkaan ole speaktaakkelia. Myös lehdistön ja harrastajien näkökulma pelaamisen kertojina nousee tutkimuksessa esille. Jo 1980-luvulla lehdistö käytti peliarvioissaan keinoja kerronnallistaa pelikokemusta lukijoille. Internetiin kirjoitetut Let's Playt päätyivät 2000-luvun puolessa välissä. Näissä teksteissä on selkeitä yhtymäkohtia toisiinsa, siitäkkin huolimatta, että on vaikea todistaa kirjoittajien yhteyttä kyseisten tekstien lukijoina.

Oman pelaamisen kuvaamisella on toisin sanoen yllättävänkin pitkä historia, josta sen nykyinen rooli osana pelaamisen kulttuuria on muodostunut. Se on kulkenut yhdessä kilpapelaamisen kehityksen kanssa, kunnes 2000-luvun aikana nämä tyyllilajit alkoivat harrastajaproduktioiden kasvamisen ja televisio-ohjelmien määrän hiipumisen seurauksena lähteä omiin suuntiinsa. Joka tapauksessa videot, kuvat ja tarinat pelaamisesta ovat tulleet jäädäkseen ja niiden rooli osana kulttuuria on jatkuvasti vain vahvistumassa.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

“WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE!”: STORYTELLING IN ONLINE LET’S PLAYS

by

Tero Kerttula April 2019

Games and Culture 14 (3), 236-255

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Article

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the phenomenon called Let’s Play (LP) and conduct a narrative analysis on two LPs made of Sierra Entertainment’s *Phantasmagoria* games. The LPs tell viewers a story different from the one told in the games, that is, they tell the story of the player rather than that of the game. In that story, the experience of playing a video game is revealed to the audience. This story would be hidden without the player-narrators know as LPs around the world. I conduct my analysis by describing seven different narrative elements that form the narration of a LP and explain how these elements together form this story of the player.

Keywords

Let’s Play, narrative, video games, YouTube, online, video

Video games are a form of interactive entertainment. But what if the games were stripped of their interactivity and published in the form of strictly written stories that could be interpreted as movies and books are? This is where the Let’s Play (LP) comes in. An LP is a narrated video or a piece of writing about playing a video game. The selected game is played in a free tempo, and the type of narrative is up to the narrator. There is no single rule of how to make an LP, as they come in varied styles

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(Croshaw, 2011, p. 2; Hale, 2013, pp. 6–8; Ligman, 2011, pp. 8–11). The main idea is to show footage of gameplay, usually with a narrative (Croshaw, 2011, pp. 1–2; Kerttula, 2014, pp. 82–83). There are many videos that are called LPs but which lack a narrative. These videos are more often referred to as long plays because they include nothing but the complete gameplay itself (FAQ, n.d.).

In this article, I study the narrative elements of an LP. In addition, I attempt to determine how the narration of an LP alters the narrative of the game being played. Because the videos make the games noninteractive, I am also interested to find out how the gameplay is narrated and represented when stripped of interactivity. In this sense, the games represented in LPs get connected to wide array of different media material such as movies and literature. Therefore, it is important to examine the narrative aspect of the LPs because via them, the games converge to other media in ways they perhaps could not have before.

The two games selected for closer analyses in this article are *Phantasmagoria* and *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh*. They are horror adventure games, the former being written by Roberta Williams and the latter by Lorelei Shannon. In 2008, the gamer Noah Antwiler (aka. Spoony) made an LP of the second game (see Antwiler, 2008). Originally, the videos were split into fifteen 20-min episodes, but these have now been combined into 5-hr-long episodes. For this reason, the continuity between the five episodes is uneven. Antwiler's live-action LP of *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* is still one of the most well known of its kind currently available on the Internet. Its impact can be seen, for example, in the user reviews of the game when it became available at Good Old Games as a digital download. Many users quoted Antwiler's LP in their reviews, with one user, Spiritzarconian, mentioning how it has affected the popularity of the game:

I can tell by the comments alone that I'm not the only person who bought this because of a certain Let's Play out there, and frankly that's the best reason to get this. (2010)

After Antwiler's LP, many more LPs of both *Phantasmagoria* games emerged. One of those is EnsignRicky011's written LP of the first *Phantasmagoria* (2014). This LP is interesting because at its beginning, the writer acknowledges the influence of Antwiler's LP. However, one major difference between the two LPs in question is that the written LP lacks audio commentary. The author uses only screenshots and only a few video clips to prove his points, but the commentary is made by text only.

The live action LPs seem to contribute to what Creeber (2011) considers a continuation of television history: digital homemade stories for the vast audience of the Internet (p. 603). Additionally, as Strangelove (2010) states, today's audience has a wide array of media material to use when rewriting the meanings of existing products (p. 163). LPs are a prime example of this because without the original source material and the possibility to record it, they would not exist at all. From the perspective of the story, LPs can be placed roughly into two categories: (a) written stories with screenshots and (b) videos. There is also a style that combines these two

by using video but narrating the gameplay with text instead of with voice. For example, on her YouTube gaming channel Let's Player, PinkKittyRose narrates her video gameplay with Final Fantasy-style text boxes.

When it comes down to the personalities, gaming journalist Ben Croshaw (2011) has pointed out that many Let's Players seem to think that the videos are more about the personality of the player-narrator than about the narrative of the game itself. By doing so, the player-narrators place the focus on themselves rather than on the games they are playing. (p. 2).

Many of the elements in LPs also fit into what Jenkins (2006) calls convergence culture, in which the role of the audience is essential not only as commenters but also as creators. The Internet makes all types of media converge, but through the audience and the way that new media is consumed and created by them, the meanings begin to alter (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 16, 270). As mentioned, the convergence in this case means that the LPs bring the games also closer to other media and alter the form in which the games were originally presented.

Interactive Narration Without Interaction

Phantasmagoria and *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* are straightforward adventure games, where the story proceeds linearly as the player solves puzzles along the way. In both, the main plot has no diverging branches, except for the ending of the second game, which the player decides in the last moment of the game. This is what Crawford (2003) calls a puzzle system, where solving puzzles moves the story forward, even though exploring and interacting with the game world mixes up the order where things between major plot points happen (pp. 259–260).

Now, in a puzzle system such as *Phantasmagoria*, the player is assumed to spend significant time solving the puzzles and experimenting. Although the game is linear, it allows the player to spend his time freely in the game world. Therefore, as Juul (2004) has suggested, watching the gameplay is simply not the same thing as playing the game itself (p. 133). As Newman (2013, p. 62) writes, videos of gameplay generally provide tips and insight into game mechanics and techniques only. A player can acquire deeper insight into the story by exploring and trying various aspects of the game, but ultimately the player cannot actually interfere with the story—or in the cases of games with multiple endings, stories—that the writers have planned. The search for the story elements gives an illusion of interactivity, but in reality, the story is linear even if there are possibilities for different stories in multiple playthroughs (Iuppa & Borst, 2007, p. 224).

The *Phantasmagoria* games are interesting objects of study for more than their puzzles and narratives. Both games in the series were part of attempts by Sierra to bring cinematic qualities to gaming, thus narrowing the space between games and film. The cutscenes as well as the game scenery are designed to resemble a movie, with lighting, camera angles, and other visual elements one would recognize from a

movie (e.g., King & Krzywinska, 2006, pp. 114–115). In the mid-1990s, Sierra, like many other companies, tried to fuse movies and video games in many of its products. Along with their introduction of new titles such as *Phantasmagoria* and *Urban Runner*, the interactive video format was also introduced to existing franchises—such as *Gabriel Knight*, *Police Quest*, and, to some extent, *King's Quest*, even though the seventh installment in the oldest of the Sierra franchises used animated video cutscenes instead of full motion video.

Phantasmagoria and other full-motion video (FMV) adventures by Sierra differ, however, from other attempts to capture movie-like qualities and storytelling in a video game in how they fused elements from classic adventure gaming with cinematic elements. Many of the early FMV games were referred to as roller coasters, where the player had limited options to affect the gameplay, story, and the playtime. There were a few exceptions, such as *Congo the Movie: Descent into Zinj* and *Ripper*, but those games used first-person perspective, whereas in Sierra games, the protagonist is always visible, and the use of camera angles is similar to that found in traditional adventure games.

The amount of movie material in both *Phantasmagoria* games is huge. From a ludological point of view (e.g., Aarseth, 2004, p. 362), it is true that the movies and gameplay are intertwined, so that the movies affect gameplay and, in some sense, vice versa. This is true not only in gameplay but also in a game's narrative and visuals. Whenever a player can be active, the game attempts to mimic, as much as is possible, the same style that the movies have. This mimicry is why I have used narrative analysis to examine the LPs in this study. The narrative elements show how the narration is a necessary element of adding the dimension of the player to the whole story. I analyze and refer to the original games and their own narrative in the selected pieces in order to make a contrast between the game narrative and the LP narrative. This contrast also makes it easier to point out the possible shifts in genre the LPs make.

The studied LPs are clearly humorous, seemingly drawing their humor from the lack of quality in the games. The acting and gameplay in general are consistently ridiculed, and in the opinion of the players, the games are not very good. This is a view supported by reviews of *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* at the time of its release. It was received poorly by both critics and gamers around the world (see *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh*). This humorous perspective pervades the narration.

Phantasmagoria

The first *Phantasmagoria* was released in 1995 with significant hype and advertising behind it. The game was lauded as the first real symbiosis of horror movies and video games. The enthusiasm and effort behind the project were clear. The game came on 7 CD-ROM disc, where each disc represented one chapter of the story. There was an element of marketing in this decision because at that time, no other

game was supposedly as huge in size as *Phantasmagoria* was (Main, 2011). The game was also a remarkable success, selling over a million copies and becoming, at that time, Sierra On-Line's best-selling game (Phillips, 1996).

Phantasmagoria tells the player a story of a young, recently wed couple, Donald Gordon and Adrienne Delaney, who move into an old mansion in the country. Donald is a professional author who is supposed to get enough space and peace to complete his latest novel, which leaves Adrienne, the story's heroine, unemployed for the time being. The house they move into seems to be haunted by the spirit of an evil magician named Carno. The magician's spirit begins to possess Donald who starts pursuing his wife around the mansion. In one of the most controversial scenes of the game, the possessed Donald even rapes his wife. This much debated scene was one of the points in story, where writer Roberta Williams felt that she would need to make players connect with the story and characters. The emotions provoked by such scenes were, according to Williams, necessary for the horror elements of the whole story (Jong & Williams, 2006).

The story begins with basic drama with the necessary introduction of the characters and locations. As the evil spirit becomes discovered, the horror elements start emerging along with the psychological terror and ghost stories. By the end of the game, the story assumes the form of gore and splatter horror, especially in the scenes where the protagonist dies. In comparison to its sequel, the world in the first *Phantasmagoria* is much more open, as only a few entrances are blocked at the beginning. The Carno manor is a huge place with many aspects to discover and try. In the visual narrative, the horror elements are evident. From mysterious crypts and demonic paintings to the color scheme and the huge number of mirrors, everything in the house seems to both intrigue and intimidate Adrienne.

Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh tells the story of Curtis Craig who works as a copywriter in a corporation called Wyntech. As the story unfolds, we learn that Wyntech is up to no good and allowing no one to interfere. The game is played in the usual point-and-click fashion, where the player controls Curtis by pointing at things on the screen with the computer's mouse, allowing Curtis to interact with his surroundings. Unlike the first game, *Phantasmagoria 2* incorporated science fiction into the story, including interdimensional travel and aliens. According to its writer, Lorelei Shannon, these twists in the plot were criticized by many fans, although she also claimed that the elements were in the story right from the beginning (Bellatti, Larme, O'Sullivan, & Shannon, 1998).

Although the story is not a continuation of the original *Phantasmagoria*, its structure is similar. After the introductions, the horror elements are of a more psychological kind, but the splatter horror comes much sooner than in the original. By the end of the story, the horror takes one further turn into gory science fiction. Furthermore, as Mateas (2004, pp. 25–26) has noted, many puzzle-based adventures force the player to randomly try to combine different inventory objects, therefore distracting the player somewhat from the narrative. This is also the case with *Phantasmagoria 2*. Although it can be seen that the puzzles are part of the overall

narrative, what actually happens is that the wandering around and trying different objects brings the story to many halts. Then again, a successful trial-and-error attempt is usually rewarded with more video that moves the story forward, and these parts are always connected to the just solved puzzle.

Phantasmagoria 2 limits the places a player can visit in a number of ways. For example, a player cannot exit Curtis's house at the beginning without finding the proper items. The game also incorporates a minimal world map, where locations appear only when the time is right. The player cannot enter these locations whenever because some of the puzzles and story elements must be uncovered before moving on to the next one. This design also makes the story of the game much more linear than its predecessor. The player is forced to do things in a certain order, so that other things happen. For example, after certain plot points, the map opens up a route to Curtis's psychiatrist. However, if the player tries to enter the office too soon, Curtis says that it is not time for his appointment yet. This can get confusing because the game never provides the exact time when Curtis is supposed to have the appointment. The only solution is to first solve the given puzzles and keep trying to get to the office. Despite that, both games fit Crawford's description of a puzzle system. While the player is active, the stories of the games are on hold until something is accomplished, be that a solved puzzle or a discovered dialogue.

LP as Stories

The narrative structure of a video game is very much different than for movies or novels. Because some video games let the player explore and in some cases even choose the way the story unfolds, the relationship between a story and the gameplay is meaningful. Especially, when writing for an open world video game, the writer needs to make the player go through all important parts of the story, so that the story could be complete (DeMarle, 2007, pp. 72–74). Even for *Phantasmagoria*, this is true, even though the story is linear. The writer cannot dictate where the player should go next and cannot assume that the items, for example, are picked up in a written order.

An LP is more straightforward structurally, as the audience cannot interfere with the decisions of the player-narrator. Therefore, the narrative has to be analyzed with traditional methods. One way to decipher the narrative of LPs is through, for example, the Hero's Journey model of Joseph Campbell and Syd Field's three-act model (Jacobs, 2007, pp. 27–31). These two approaches, however, leave many questions unanswered. What if, for example, Antwiler had played the game before? What would the expectations be and how would the narrative change? Could the game still surprise the hapless hero? Did he try to follow the three-act structure or is it only because of the game's own narrative? Because of the different backgrounds of Let's Players, the phenomenon must also be analyzed with a range of methods.

These differences are also why I have decided to view LPs through narrativization, that is, through how the players tell the story of their experience and with what

elements. As White (1987) has written, narrativization could be seen as a way to transform historical material into a story (pp. 1–25). In both the live-action and written LPs, this is exactly the case. Both LPs enter into a dialogue with the source material and give new meanings to the original narrative. According to Fludernik (1996, pp. 31–35), this kind of narrativization helps to understand the original material better. Regarding White's theories, Fludernik also comments on how, instead of narrativization, White should use the term storification because he seems to be searching for a plot, with the traditional story elements of a beginning, a middle, and an end. When it comes to LPs, however, there is a plot as stated earlier. The reason for this is easy to see: The source material has a traditional plot, so the ways the players narrate the playing experience has to follow this structure even though the story differs from the original. In her book *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Riessman (2008) identified seven characteristics and functions that a narrative can have. LPs fulfill these criteria in their own way because they certainly possess a distinct rhetoric, one in which the narrator leads the audience to the story of how the actions and story in the game really went (pp. 8–9). This framework is useful in this study, as it makes it possible to get deeper insight into what the player-narrators are actually saying in the videos—how the stories form for what specific elements.

To begin deciphering the stories, I have first played both the games and watched and read both of the LPs several times in order to acquire an in-depth view of what the story is about. By comparing the original narration of the game and the narration of the LPs, I started to search for elements with which the LPs make their own narrative structure and at the same time alter the narration of the original games. I refer to the Let's Players as player-narrators to make presence to the particular dual role they are taking. This is important to notice, as the player-narrators are documenting their playing experience with the narration. If the player-narrator would not be playing the game while narrating, the essence of the story would probably be different.

At first, I started to take notice about the themes the player-narrators lines in the LPs and making categories from there. One by one, I then started narrowing the themes into smaller number of different elements that the narration held. From there, I identified seven elements that fulfilled the themes the narration had: descriptive narration, story narration, audiovisual narration, game mechanics narration, intertextuality, reflective narration, and alternative narration. These elements are not the ones defined by White or Riessmann but rather inspired from those. Even though a line may be vaguely commenting on the mechanics of the game, via the other elements, the comment can acquire an intertextual dimension while also providing the story with alternative narration.

Descriptive narration is what the player-narrator sees in front of him and what he knows or does not know about the game. In the live-action LP, a descriptive narrative line can be as follows: "Got a screwdriver, a picture, there's a dead rat? A condom, is that a condom? Whatever that was."

The line is linked to an image in which we see various items in a drawer. All of those items are present and visible, and the player-narrator tells us what he sees. Therefore, in this line, Spooky only tells the viewer what is in front of him right now, without adding anything to the story. This also applies to written elements in the game that are not originally narrated by voice but become so via the Let's Player.

In contrast, the items on display are not narrated in the game because they can be interacted with, and the game interface provides the player with more specific information about the items in view. This serves the game's own narrative in the way that Curtis is merely looking at items he knows are already there. Similar lines are also present in the written LP: "Car parts? Is that what I'm seeing in here?"

This narration can also be considered as story exposition. In the game itself, the items seen in the drawer must be figured out by examining them with the interface. Because this possibility does not exist while watching an LP, the exposition is carried out by the player-narrator, he is thinking out loud while playing.

Descriptive narration also contains background information. These lines share information with the viewer about the game, the player-narrator, or anything that has something to do with the LP session. It can work alone, or it can have, as in this line from the live-action LP, self-reflection on the side, under the descriptive narration:

I haven't heard much about this one, so I'm going in basically blind, although I have heard it has a lot of mature themes and a lot of gore to it, so let's check it out.

Here Spooky makes it clear he has not played the game before, an important piece of information when watching the LP. On the other hand, he has clearly read or heard about the game and he expresses an expectation of mature content. The background information provided at the beginning of the written LP also reveals aspects of the game at hand:

Phantasmagoria is a horror FMV game published in 1995 by Sierra, and designed by Roberta Williams of King's Quest fame... Was it controversial? Yes. So much that Australia outright banned it.

Here the player-narrator of the written LP informs readers of issues they should probably be aware of before continuing. In this case, the ban in Australia refers to the number of controversial scenes in the game, which gives the reader an idea of what should be expected from the game and the LP to come.

Story narration has much more to do with the original storytelling of the game, and the story of the LP in question than just basic descriptive narration. This level includes all the subelements that interfere with the narration of the story. Here's an example from the live-action LP: "Oh, you see that? It said something there! It said 'usurper' or something like that!"

Spooky says this at the part where the supposedly demonic word flashes on the computer screen in Curtis's cubicle so quickly that it is difficult for the player to see.

In the game, these flashing words are meant to be Curtis's delusions. There are several parts where something happens on the screen, changing the meaning of words and images in the scenery. In the game, these work as another window to Curtis's mind, to give the player an idea that perhaps something is wrong in the protagonist's head. In the LP, the experience of these events is shared between the viewer and the player-narrator. The events pass by quickly, so in this case, Spooky says what he has just seen, as an instinct. As these events are important in the story for understanding the main character better, the player-narrator narrates them so that they are not missed.

In the written LP, there is more story narration because of the absence of moving images. Therefore, the player-narrator must explain what is happening in the scenes, so that the reader can understand how the plot of the game is evolving. One example of this kind of narration goes as follows: "Adrienne squeezes a few drops of . . . wine? . . . out and proclaims 'It's Good.'"

These lines are usually connected with a scene where a cutscene is playing and the narrator must explain to readers what is going on. For example, in this case, the line is paired with a screenshot in which Adrienne is turning the tap of a barrel, but the further information and the subsequent line of dialogue would be missing without the story narration by the player-narrator.

When the players' narration of the story lacks other defining elements, the players merely narrate the story of the game to the audience while at the same time giving some insight into their mind-set. As both examples show, the player-narrators are unsure of what is happening in the game, which makes them narrate events in order to help understand what the game is trying to say. For this reason, I was careful in my transcoding to include only lines related to the original story under story narration.

Audiovisual narration comments on the sounds and images of the game. This narrative usually critiques the audiovisual design of the game, but there can also be storytelling elements linked to the aesthetics of the game. In the live-action LP of *Phantasmagoria 2*, Spooky provides audiovisual narrative like the following: "Green cubicles and purple walls, that's how we do things at Joker Corp!"

This line seemingly comments on the unsightly aesthetic design of Curtis' office (Figure 1) while also connecting the visual to somewhere else with an intertextual cultural reference. The colors remind the player-narrator of the Joker, the arch-villain from the Batman universe, and he shares this insight with the audience.

The game itself does not explain the colors, and the aesthetic design of the office has nothing to do with the narrative. These kinds of audiovisual cues are perhaps present to give the playing environment distinction, to make it stand out from the other environments in the game. Therefore, the way the player-narrator narrates the surroundings gives these places new narrative meanings and connects them to the overall story outside the game narrative.

In the written LP, the narration of the audiovisual aspects is similar to that in the live-action one: "I love how it's this nice cozy kitchen in most respects, cute little tapestry, and then there's the fucking demon engraved over the stove."



Figure 1. *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* gameplay scene.



Figure 2. *Phantasmagoria* gameplay scene.

In these two examples, the player-narrators comment mostly on the art direction of the game, rather than on the graphics from a technical point of view. With the art direction comes, of course, commentary on the visual architecture of the game, such as this line in the written LP:

Okay Adrienne. I can accept the possibility that you bought this house without looking inside it. But. Did the scowling giant face attached to the house escape your attention somehow? Anyway, from this location, all I can do is go back, so let's head to the right this time."

This line refers to the giant head protruding from the side of the Carno Mansion (Figure 2). Even from the game's own narrative point of view, this particular piece is

hard to understand because the aforementioned head cannot be interacted with in the game. The elements do, however, serve the narration more than the aforementioned color scheme of *Phantasmagoria 2*. The Carno Mansion is supposed to be scary and gothic to give the player a feel of a sinister environment. Despite the lack of possibilities to interact with the surroundings, the head and other decorative elements in the mansion visualize the story in a way that is consistent with the horror genre.

Game-mechanics narration comments on the gaming elements of the subject in question. At this level, we can find answers to such questions as what the interface of the game is like, how it feels to play and use the game, and what is done right as well as wrong in the playability of the game.

This way the game-mechanics narration seems to take place in what Salen and Zimmermann (2004, p. 67) call the “space of possibility,” as the player-narrators often narrate the mechanics from the point of view of what actions are possible. In the live-action LP, one can see that this refers to not only the game interface but also to the movement in the game world: “Time to work on that Pensky-file . . . [shouting] if I ever get back to my cubicle! This is so awkward!”

In this example, as mentioned earlier, Spooky has not played the game before and has to get accustomed to the interface and the mechanics of the game. This leads to situations where Spooky has no idea what he should do or, for example, how to combine items. In the example, Spooky has got lost in the office building because of badly designed viewpoints. Instead of seeing this as an audiovisual problem, he refers more to the overall design and playability of the game. There is also a reference to the interface here, as the game seems to lose the sense of direction when the room is changed.

In the written LP, the player-narrator does not make it clear whether he has played the game before or not. However, the way he narrates the game mechanics and interface suggests that maybe this is his first time with the game:

The skull in the lower left will introduce itself as “The Hintkeeper” if you click on it, and warns that using him too many times will “ruin the game”. So, yeah, gonna avoid that one. The thing on the left is unclickable at the moment, and I’m gonna assume that’s because I have no inventory.

This passage reveals that the player-narrator has not played the game before because instead of telling the reader directly what the different elements in the interface are, he makes assumptions and shows caution towards the game’s hint system.

The element of *intertextuality* connects the game mechanics, visuals, and story to other forms of popular culture, such as movies, music, and other video games. In the games themselves, the intertextuality generates deeper meaning for the events and requires knowledge of certain cultural artifacts, even though it is possible to play the game without the knowledge (Kücklich, 2006, pp. 105–107). For the LPs, the intertextuality works in a similar way: You can watch the video without knowledge

of the reference, but you will get more out of the narrative with it. For example, under the story narrative, an intertextual cultural reference, such as this one made in the live-action LP, is not alone: “I’m Mike Wallace. I’m Lesley Stahl. All this and Andy Rooney in 60 minutes.”

Spoony says this line over the opening cinematic of the game as standard narration. The line refers to the CBS television news program 60 Minutes and suggests that the current visuals of the game resemble the show’s opening credits. Should you not know the show that the line refers to, it adds little to the viewer’s knowledge.

In the written LP, there are also a number of intertextual references to other LPs, including Spoony’s LP of *Phantasmagoria 2*: “Oh man, a mirror. Now, if the Let’s Play of *Phantasmagoria 2* has taught me anything, mirrors can be fun!”

This line assumes that the reader has watched Spoony’s LP and knows why the mirrors are so seemingly important. There is also a narrative assumption here. In *Phantasmagoria 2*, the mirrors are a part of the story. When the player looks in the mirrors, they reveal many insights into the protagonist’s mind. However, in the first *Phantasmagoria*, the mirrors trigger only cutscenes in which Adrienne checks her makeup and hair and thus contribute little to the actual story line.

The intertextuality with other media artifacts is also present in the written LP:

Why, what a charming New England village . . . in Stephen King’s Maine

Or

Okay, so this is what it’s like inside David Lynch’s head.

The tone of intertextuality in the written LP is the same as it is in the live action one. Even though the audience can only see screenshots instead of video, the images are enough to explain the references to those who are familiar with, in this case, the work of the author Stephen King and the filmmaker David Lynch.

The intertextuality is also different from the references found in the games themselves. For example, *Phantasmagoria 2* has a few scenes where it refers to the popular culture of the mid-1990s, such as in one passing reference to the musician MC Hammer. However, the array of intertextuality seems to be much wider in the LPs, including references to literature, movies, music, and sometimes even to other LPs. It is also important to note that because the LPs have been made much later than the games themselves, the potential variety of intertextual references is also much broader, which can be seen in connections made to, for example, Internet memes.

LP in YouTube and other video services can also be seen as a form of vlogging, recorded gaming diaries. However, as Wesch (2010) has written, the vlogs are introspective, continuous monologues (p. 26). LPs on the contrary can be quite social. It is not unusual to see an LP narrated by multiple people. Quite many Let’s Players also reflect on their viewers, such as Finnish player-narrator Wildeem who plays games online with her viewers and can even have a conversation online with them during the recordings (Kerttula, 2014, p. 85). This results in *reflective narration* (e.g., Strangelove, 2010, pp. 74–77). In Antwiler’s case, because his whole LP is

divided into episodes, the audience has given him some tips in the comment section between the episodes and he uses these hints to his advantage.

So, as you can see, my first step was to, of course try to click the wallet on myself, which didn't work. But, I later learned by caving in and reading the instructions and by the input of you loyal listeners out there, by uh . . . if I click on the eyeball on the lower left corner it should probably search the wallet.

This line is about a puzzle Antwiler could not solve in the previous episode because of the seemingly cumbersome interface. Therefore, the audience who had played the game before gave him information about the interface and some hints to the puzzle instead of revealing the answer. This seems to work and the puzzle is solved. The line also contains some narration of game mechanics—specifically of how Antwiler has tried to use the interface—but it is through the audience that he finally understands how it actually works.

Reflective narration seems to be rare, however. Many LPs, especially of shorter games, are posted as single, standalone works. This does not leave room for the audience to provide tips to the player. In the written LP, the commentary from the audience is absent because the whole text was put up on the site at one time. In addition, even though there is an option to comment, no comments have to date been made. So, instead of direct dialogue between the audience and the player, the player-narrators reflect with the audience in different ways during the adventure.

Already stuck, guys. I don't know. (Live-action LP)

It's worth noticing that if you didn't grab the snowman earlier, you can make it into the theater without being caught, and there Adrienne thinks she sees Harriet . . . (Written LP)

These two examples from the LPs show how the player-narrator takes the audience into account by either recognizing them or by giving them some information about the gameplay. So even though there is not necessarily actual social interaction between the player and the audience, the player-narrators are aware that their stories are being watched and read. The player-narrators speak to the audience even if the audience is not there.

This brings us to the self-reflection (Kerby, 1991, pp. 39–40) of the Let's Player. These are moments when the player-narrator refers to something about himself, be that his earlier experiences in the genre, his feelings and his thoughts about the game, or anything that has to do directly with the player himself. These moments are usually brought up with explicit narrative, such as this revealing comment by Spony: “You know, this is awfully too much like my normal day at work, so remind me again why I'm playing this?”

In this self-reflection, we learn something about the player-narrator. These lines reveal to the audience, for example, the player-narrator's relation to the game.

Depending on the player, there can also be lines with information about the daily life of the player-narrator, but these lines seem to connect to the game experience in one way or another.

In the line mentioned earlier, the viewers learn something about the player-narrator's personal life, mainly his profession. It seems that the player-narrator works in some sort of office outside his online personality, and it also hints that Spooky cannot support himself by just making the videos. This aspect of his life is later detailed more in his vlogs and blog entries, but even if viewers do not see those, they learn something about the player-narrator.

These elements deal almost completely with the game's own narrative, and this leads into perhaps the most peculiar of the identified narrative elements: *alternative narration*. This type of narration molds the original narration of the game in the direction the Let's Player chooses. On many occasions, it serves to ridicule the game, but it also seems to bring something new to the silent moments of the game and can even affect the persona of the game character. Alternative narration can include alternative dialogue or a new monologue to replace the original lines from the game. On some occasions, the alternative dialogue comes up after the original line and supplements the line with further meanings:

Curtis: I've read every book I own at least twice.

Spoony: Maybe I should go to a library.

This kind of dialogue between the game's protagonist and the player is a common style of narration for Spooky. However, the style is strange overall because it is not so much dialogue as it is a continuation of the original line. By that, Antwiler assumes the role of Curtis Craig for a moment and takes himself away from his role as Spooky, only to return to it a moment later. Spooky also adds dialogue to the silent parts of the game. For example, Spooky remarks "What an eccentric performance!" in a scene where Curtis is in a nightclub and tries to talk to a person.

This person does not respond. Instead, he only looks at Curtis, lifts his sunglasses, and smiles. By again assuming the persona of the protagonist, Spooky changes the meaning of the original scene completely, in this case giving personality to an otherwise meaningless character.

Alternative narration, however, plays out as an omniscient narrator. For example, in the opening scene (Figure 3) where there is no narration from the game, Spooky narrates the scene with his own lines: "Start off slow with those electrical shocks, if you go too high, he has nowhere to go."

At this point, the narration of the game itself can be heard and Spooky replaces it with the narration of his own. The viewer can actually hear what is being said in the game, although Spooky's voice is notably louder.

In the written LP, the dialogue between the main characters and the narrator is very different because we cannot hear the original dialogue in real time. In a few examples, the player does add some alternative narration or monologue in the



Figure 3. *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh* opening scene.



Figure 4. *Phantasmagoria* opening scene.

written LP such as the scene in which Adrienne tries out a magical wishing machine. Here, the player captions the image with the phrase, “I wish I was big!”

In the actual gameplay, the machine greets the protagonist with an evil prophecy. However, this result does not satisfy the player who then leaves the role of Adrienne and returns to his own: “Hey, that didn’t answer my wish at all!”

There is still alternative narration to be found in the written LP though. For example, after the opening scene, the player shows us a still image of Donald (Figure 4) and makes up his own line for the situation: “Somebody kept me up last night.”

As Spooky’s LP of *Phantasmagoria 2* progresses, the frequency of the different types of narrative elements begins to diverge. In the first 2 hr, there is much more narration related to the game mechanics than in the final hours. This difference is most likely because Spooky is playing the game for the first time. In the later hours, alternative dialogue and narration occur more often due to a lack of need to comment

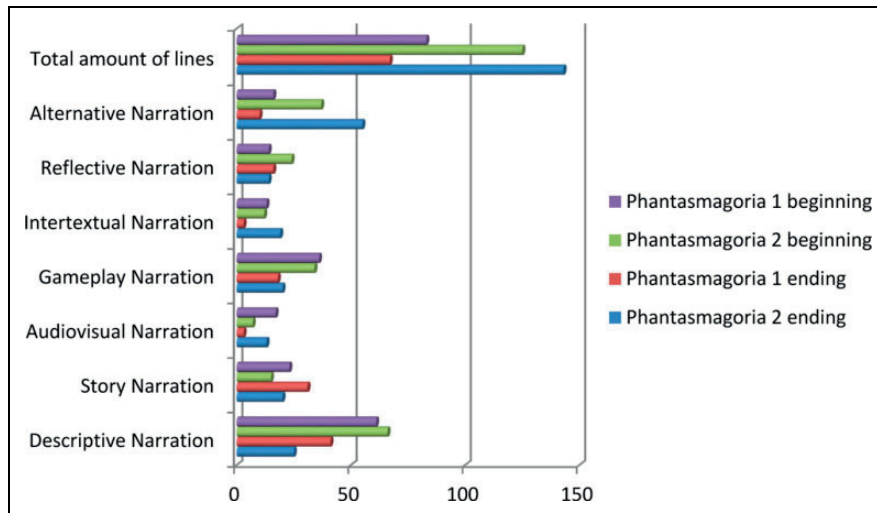


Figure 5. Amount of narrative elements at the beginning and end of the Let's Plays.

on the now learned gameplay. Narration about the audiovisual aspects is always present without any change in frequency.

As mentioned previously, *Phantasmagoria 2* has two endings, and the live-action LP shows viewers both by editing in footage of each one. In this way, the audience learns the whole story line of the game and acquires a complete picture of the events that unfold. Showing both endings is possible because the previous decisions that the player has made, except for the final one, do not affect the ending. This is also explained at the ending of the LP.

It can also be seen that the different elements are usually interconnected with one another, so that one line can have multiple elements and perspectives to it. Although the narration could be studied from a single perspective—intertextuality, for example—the web of elements in the narration is dense, making it a single complete story with connections even to itself. These shifts in the narration then makeup the structure of the story, which diverges from the narrative structure of the game itself. This structure adds up as the story of a player, not of the game. It is also important to notice that the story of the player is never the same, as all player-narrators tell their own stories. The story could be seen as a historical text of how the events of the game went from one person's cultural perspective, which the audience listens from their own perspective (White, 1978, pp. 84–87).

Figure 5 shows the amount of narration types at the beginning and end of both LPs. The written LP has fewer total lines than the live-action one, but the amounts indicate some interesting points. The most obvious change between the beginning and ending is the amount of descriptive and alternative narration in *Phantasmagoria 2*. Although initially there are many types of descriptive narration occurring, toward

the end of the live-action LP the alternative narration becomes more prevalent, amounting to a third of all narration in the final two episodes. In addition, the amount of alternative narration is much lower in the written LP.

Another significant difference is that, when compared by the amount of lines in total, the written LP contains far more descriptive narration than the live action one does. By looking at the structure of the written LP, it is clear that the narrator has to describe his actions and the cutscenes more than he would have to in the live-action LP. However, the author of the written LP, EnsignRicky011, mentions that he has been influenced by Spooony's live-action narration. This influence can be seen in his writing style, but as indicated in Figure 5, the narrative elements are different from Spooony's performance.

At the end of both LPs, however, the amount of gameplay narration declines. One reason for this could be the nature of the game structure: In both games, the ending is more straightforward than the beginning. A second possible reason could be that both players have learned how to play the game, therefore reducing the need to continue explaining the gameplay elements any longer.

Conclusion and Future Studies

Taken together, the elements outlined earlier contribute to the form of an LP. It can be seen that the narrative of an LP draws on other forms of popular culture, such as reviews, comedic television shows, and Internet memes. By mixing these elements together, LPs create a unique entity but at the same time tell us subtle things not only about the narrators but also about the world surrounding them. All of the elements mentioned do not necessarily appear in every LP. If the focus is on, for example, the gameplay, there might not be as much commentary on the audiovisual aspects of the game. However, the two LPs analyzed in this article represent the possible elements of the narration well.

LPs also narrate some narrative gaming elements that are more difficult to observe. According to Janet Murray, even the puzzle game *Tetris* could contain dramatic content (Murray, 1997, p. 144). While the dramatic content in the game itself can be questioned, watching an LP of *Tetris* (see Deceased Crab 2008) perhaps shows what this dramatic content could be through the narration. Excitement, disappointment, victory, and defeat are all in plain view as the player proceeds through the gameplay. This is how Let's Players alter the narration of the source material. LPs ultimately reveal a hidden layer of the game narrative: the story of the player and the experience.

This easiest part of this hidden layer to point out is the gameplay, that is, those parts where the game does not continue the story. Just as a Let's Player could be narrating a game of *Tetris*, in the *Phantasmagoria* games, the narration does not cease as the game is being played nor when the gameplay itself is narrated. So, referring again to Hayden White, the narrativization in these two LPs does, in fact, transform the material into a story, but the story differs from

the original. Both LPs discuss the source material and give new meanings to the original narrative. The narration also connects the games to the media world differently than they were upon their first release. As the games age and new media products arrive, the Let's Players bring these games to a much larger network of referential material.

Of course, this kind of narration could also be found, for example, in movie commentaries or online audio commentaries such as RiffTrax. The one big difference between the audio commentaries and LPs is that LPs argue not only with a game's story but also with its mechanics. Even though LPs are not reviews, they certainly include critical commentary.

However, it is clear that the games in the LPs are merely objects and vessels for the story. Even though the gameplay is an important point of the narrative structure of an LP, there is a shift of narrative and of protagonist that moves the focus from the game to the player. To put it simply, an LP is a story about playing a video game, in which the main character is the player, not the original protagonist of the game. What cannot be accessed by deconstructing the structure of an LP, though, are the affection of the personality and the voice of the player-narrator. In future research, I aim to examine the reasons behind the popularity of LPs as well as what the audience sees in the videos that makes them worthwhile. I cannot, therefore, bypass the player-narrator himself.

The theoretical framework used in this study can be used in many ways in other studies. From the narrative elements discovered here, it would be easy in future studies, for example, take the element of intertextuality and analyze it deeper. By deconstructing the narrative structure, I can identify those aspects the audience wants to hear in the narrative. If they consider commentary on the game mechanics important, or maybe on the story and characters of the game, the narrative they look for is easily identified. A second line of future research is an analysis of the visual narrative in LPs. We can hear the commentary of the player-narrator, but we also observe his actions visually while in the game. Not all actions are commented on audibly, therefore the visual narrative elements of how the player-narrator interacts with the game world needs to be examined.

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Author Biography

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II

LET'S PLAY PELIKOKEMUKSELLISEN MUISTITIEDON TUOTTAJANA

by

Tero Kerttula January 2017

Ennen ja nyt 1/2017, 1-15

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Let's Play pelikokemuksellisen muistitiedon tuottajana

Kirjoittanut Tero Kerttula
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Let's Play tarkoittaa teosta, jossa omaa pelisuoritusta kerronnallistetaan tarinaksi. Teos on joko videomuotoinen tai tekstiksi kirjoitettu^[1]. Nyky muodossaan ilmiö on Let's Play -tarinoita vuodesta 2007 keränneen Let's Play Archiven mukaan saanut alkunsa vuonna 2006 Something Awfulin foorumiviestien muodossa^[2]. Alkuperä ei ole selvä, sillä samankaltaisia Let's Play -henkisiä pelitarinoita on kerrottu on tätä ennenkin, kuten esimerkiksi vuonna 2003 Japanissa alkaneessa Gamecenter CX -televisiosarjassa. Let's Play on katsoja- ja lukijamäärältään yksi suurimpia harastajalähtöisen videopelikulttuurin muotoja ja nousut siksi sen merkittäväksi osaksi. Syksyllä 2016 pelkästään *YouTube*-videopalvelusta löytyy noin 58 miljoonaa videoita hakusanalla Let's Play. Suosituimmat videot keräävät miljoonia katsojia ympäri maailman, kuten esimerkiksi ruotsalaisen Felix "PewDiePie" Kjellbergin pelivideot, jonka pelkästään pelivideoita sisältävän kanavan tilaajamäärä on tällä hetkellä jo yli 48 miljoonaa katsojaa^[3]. Kaikki Let's Playt ovat julkisesti saatavilla, useimmat joko Youtubesta tai *Let's Play Archive*stä^[4]. Suuret katsojamäärät ovat mahdollistaneet myös videoiden tekemisen ammattimaisesti mainostulojen ansiosta, minkä vuoksi suosituimmista videoiden tuottajista on tullut ammattimaisia pelaajia, kuten Hector Postigon Let's Playn ansaintaloggiikka käsittelevästä artikkelista käy ilmi^[5].

Erään mahdollisen tulkintatavan mukaan Let's Playsä on kyse oman pelikokemuksen kerronnallistamisesta, jossa peli itsessään hahmoineen ja tarinoineen on, Pekka Tammen määritelmää mukailien, alistainen pelaajan omalle tarinalle^[6]. Pelisuoritus voidaan esimerkiksi nauhoittaa, samalla pelin oman kerronnan päälle puhuen. Vaihtoehtoisesti Let's Play voi olla myös kirjoitetussa muodossa, jolloin tarinaa viedään eteenpäin kuvakaappausen ja tekstimuotoisten kommenttien avulla. Tyyliillisesti moni moderni Let's Play sisältää myös elementtejä vlog-videoista, joissa kertoja puhuu yleisölleen omasta elämästään ja kuulumisistaan pelatan samalla. Itse peli jää tällöin hieman taka-alalle, mikä on nähtävissä esimerkiksi Youtube-hahmo *wildeerin* videosta *"Missä mennään? Kuulumisia ja höpöttelyä No Man's Skyn merkeissä"*^[7]

Pohjalla olevan pelin oman tarinan kerronnan päälle Let's Play luo kerronnallaan tarinan pelikokemuksesta, sitä millaiselta pelin pelaaminen tuntuu, mikä on kertojan suhde itse peliin ja toisinaan jopa täysin uudenlaisia fiktiivisiä tarinoita^[8]. Tällä tavoin Let's Playt myös liittävät pelaajansa ympäröivään yhteiskuntaan kertomalla pelaajasta jotain itsestään, kuten esimerkiksi tämän suhteen uskontoon ja hengellisytyteen^[9]. Samalla pelistä itsestään paljastuu pelkkää peliä tutkimalla tarina, joka ei näy pelkkää peliä tarkastelemalla. Tämä tarina liittyy pelaajan subjektiiviseen kokemiseen, hänen muistoihinsa pelistä ja myös pelin historialliseen asemaan. Tämä on mahdollista videoiden ja tarinoiden yleensä hitaan luonteen vuoksi. Kuten *Gabriel Menotti* toteaa artikkelissaan, muihin pelivideomuotoihin verrattuna Let's Play esittää rauhallisen temponsa vuoksi peleistä myös elementtejä, jotka saattaisivat jäädä esimerkiksi pelin mahdollisimman nopeaan suorittamiseen perustuvissa speedrun-videoissa huomaamatta. Tällaisia elementtejä ovat esimerkiksi pelin käyttöliittymät, jotka ovat pelikokemuksen kannalta oleellisia^[10].

Let's Play voidaankin nähdä myös henkilön itsensä kokemuksellisena kertontana pelitapahtumista ja peliin itseensä sekä sen pelaamiseen liittyvistä muistoista. Kuten Niklas Nylund toteaa artikkelissaan, Let's Playsä ei ole kyse niinkään pelaamisesta kuin pelaajan reaktioista ja ruudun visuaalisista tapahtumista^[11]. Tämän vuoksi käytän Let's Play -tarinoiden kertojista nimitystä pelaajakertoja, sillä tämä määritelmä kuvaa kertojan kahta roolia pelaajana ja kertojana yhtä aikaa tarinan yhteydessä parhaiten sekä myös yleisön odotusta Let's Playn sisällöstä. On myös huomattavaa, että Let's Playt ovat tyyliiltään usein erilaisia, eikä yhtä varsinaisesti oikeaa tapaa tehdä Let's Playtä ole^[12]. Tällä tavoin Let's Playt eroavat longplay-videoista, jotka eivät sisällä pelaajan omaa kertontaa lainkaan. Tutkimustietoa Let's Playsä on saatavilla vielä varsin vähän johtuen kenties ilmiön nuoresta iästä.

Tutkin tässä artikkelissa sitä, millaista muistitietoa^[13] Let's Playt voivat tuottaa muistelun avulla ja kuinka niistä kerätty muistitieto voisi olla hyödynnettävissä tutkimuksessa ja esimerkiksi digitaalisten arkojen tausta-aineistoa kerätessä. Aineistoni koostuu kolmesta V2-verkkosivuston "Pelataanpa"-videosta, joista yhtä, artikkelin näkökulmasta eniten muistelua sisältävää analyysin tarkemmin erittelemällä kerronnasta muistelukerronnan erilaisia piirteitä. Videoissa sivuston vastaava tuottaja *Mikko Heinonen* pelaa vanhoja pelejä kästellen videoissaan muun muassa *Sega Dreamcastin*, ensimmäisen *Playstationin* ja *DOS*-käyttöjärjestelmän pelejä. Pelataanpa-videosarja alkoi V2.fi -verkkopalvelussa 1.2.2015. Sarjan ensimmäinen kohdepele oli Playstation-peli *The Incredible Crisis*^{[14][15]}. Heinonen on pitkän linjan pelitoimittaja sekä pelikeräilijä. Heinonen kuuluu muun muassa vanhoja pelejä ja peliäilaitteita keräilevän *Pelikonepeijonit*-ryhmittymän^[16] perustajiin. Toimittaja- ja keräilijätäustansa vuoksi Heinosen tietämys peleistä on videoiden sisällön kannalta oleellinen asia, minkä vuoksi Pelataanpa-videoista on oletettavaa löytää muistelua. Tämän vuoksi videot ovat artikkelin kannalta kiinnostavaa sisältöä.

Alun perin Heinosen ajatuksena oli tehdä Let's Play -tyyppinen videosarja sivuston sunnuntaiohjelmistoon omista suosikkipeleistään, mutta sarjan edetessä Heinonen on käsitellyt myös itselleen tuntemattomampia, mutta omasta näkökulmastaan mielenkiintoiseksi kokemian vanhoja pelejä. Heinonen käyttää videoissaan usein viittauksia historiaan ja muistelee myös paljon omaa suhdettaan kulloinkin kyseessä olevaan pelilaitteeseen tai peliin. Heinosen henkilökohtaisen suhteen peleihin ja historiallisten viittauksien vuoksi "Pelataanpa"-videot ovat artikkelin tutkimuskysymysten kannalta hyvää aineistoa.

PELITARINAT JA MUISTELU

Kirsti Salmi-Niklanderin mukaan muistelukerronta on luonteeltaan pitkää ajanjaksoa käsittelevää sekä takautuvaa ja liittyy yksilön tai yhteisön elämän kannalta merkittäviin tapahtumiin elämän varrella^[17]. *Luisa Passerinin* tutkimuksessa todetaan vastaavasti muistelukerronnan kertovan henkilön identiteetistä sekä siitä, millaiset ariset asiat muokkaavat yksilön henkilöhistoriaa^[18]. Muistelun narratiivinen luonne on myös oletettava huomioon, sillä kuten *Alessandro Portelli* on todennut, osa muistelusta liittyy henkilön omakohtaiseen kokemukseen ja osa taas kertojan ulkopuoliseen maailmaan, jolloin kerrontaan saattaa sekoittua kertojan ulkopuolisia yhteisöllisiä kokemuksia^[19]. Asia on havaittavissa esimerkiksi videomuotoisten päiväkirjojen, vlogien kohdalla. *Michael Wesch* on todennut vlogien olevan usein kertojaa itseään tarkkailevaa, jatkuvaa monologia^[20]. Weschin määritelmä on nykyään haastettavissa, sillä moni nykyinen vlogiksi laskettava video sisältää vuorovaikutusta oletetun yleisön kanssa, eikä ole niin introspektiivinen, mikä on useasti nähtävissä myös Let's Playn tapauksessa. Moni vlog ja Let's Play keskittyy edelleen tästä huolimatta vain kertojaan tai kertojiin itseensä. Tässä artikkelissa keskityn tarkastelemaan erilaisia muistelun tapoja Let's Playsä sekä sitä, millaisia muistoja pelatut pelit herättävät.

Pelitarinat eivät siis eroa vlogoista tai blogeista paljoakaan. Itse asiassa kirjoitetut Let's Playt on monesti julkaistu blogityyillisesti osissa. Kuten vlogien tapauksessa, myös pelitarinoissa kertojan rooli on oleellinen. Let's Playt saattavat lisäksi sisältää vuorovaikutusta oletetun yleisön kanssa, mutta pääkertojana on yleensä pelaajakertoja itse^[21]. Tiettyllä tavalla muistelua Let's Playsä voidaan verrata valokuvien tai muun visuaalisen materiaalin kautta tapahtuvaan muisteluun, sillä videoissa esiintyvät pelit toimivat visuaalisina välineinä kertojan muisteluun^[22]. On kuitenkin huomattava, ettei muistelua esiinny kaikissa Let's Play -tarinoissa, eikä tarinoiden otsikoista voi yleensä päätellä, onko muistelua tarinassa mukana. Muistelu ei myöskään ole aina jatkuvaa edes vanhempien pelien tapauksessa. Useimmiten muistelu on vain vaihtelevan suuruinen osa kerronnallista kokonaisuutta.

Tutkimuksen kohdehenkilön, Mikko Heinosen kerronta perustuu peliin liittyvien historiallisten tapahtumien lisäksi Heinosen omaan muisteluun peliharrastajana. *Outi Fingermos* ja *Ulla-Maija Peltonen* määrittelevät muistitiedon tiedonantajan muistiin pohjautuvana kertomuksena, joka ei perustu kirjallisiin aikalaisähteisiin^[23]. Muistitiedolla voidaan viitata muistelua koskevaan akateemiseen tutkimukseen tai historia-tietoon, mutta sen lisäksi myös ihmisten itsensä kertomiin tulkintoihin menneisyyden tapahtumista^[24]. Tässä tapauksessa Let's Playn pelaajakertojen kertomukset olisi mahdollista nähdä muistitietona, vaikka kyseessä ei olekaan esimerkiksi haastatteluaiaineisto, jossa kertojaa olisi suoraan pyydetty muistelemaan asioita.

Let's Playn eri kerronnan tasoilla muistitietoon pohjautuva kerronta ilmenee yleensä niissä tarinan osissa, joissa kertoja pelaa peliä ja pelikokemusta itseensä ja omaan pelaajahistoriaansa^[25]. Pelataanpa-sarjassa tämän tyyppinen kerronnallistettu muistitieto näkyy Heinosen omina muistikuvina suhteessa omaan peliharrastukseen menneinä vuosina, kuten ralliautoiluspesaaalin yhteydessä^[26].

Kyllä sitä vaan kuulkaa yhdeksäsatoista vuodessa kummasti unohtaa miten jotain peliä pelataan.

Videolla Heinonen epäonnistuu useita kertoja ajaessaan, kaataa autonsa katolleen ja törmäilee hollittomasti. Muistikuviansa mukaan Heinonen on kuitenkin osannut pelata peliä paremmin aikoinaan.

Tällä tavalla tarkasteltuna tuotettua muistitietoa ei kuitenkaan olisi järkevää käyttää pääasiallisena lähteenä yksittäisten videopelien historiallista taustoitusta tehdessä, sillä Pelataanpa-sarjan tapauksessa muistitieto kytketty usein pelihistorian tapahtumiin, kuten esimerkiksi kirjoitin julkaisupäivämäärin, julkaisupeleihin tai muihin laite- ja pelihistoriaa sivuaviin yksityiskohtiin, kuten videopelien keräilykulttuuriin^[27]. Käsitellessään *Sega Dreamcastin* shoot'em up -pelejä Heinonen huomauttaa jo videon alkupuolella, miten eräänlainen videopelikeräilijän vaisto opasti ostamaan videolla nähtävät pelit edullisesti julkaisujankohdantaan:

Mä ite oon ostanu, tässä on vissiin kuus peliä, ja tota mä olen ostanu nää ite sillon kun ne tuli uutena, koska mulla oli sellanen kutina että saattaa olla, että nää on jatkossa niin kalliita, ettei niitä kuitenkaan tuu ostettua. Ja tää osottautu oikeeks, näistä suurin osa on huomattavissa hinnoissa tällä hetkellä, kun taas itse maksoin sen mitä ne nyt Play-Asiassa maksoivat kun ne sieltä tilasin.^[28]

Kun väitettä pelien hinnasta katsotaan internetin huutokauppojen hintatasoon verraten, se osoittautuu oikeaksi. Jo videolla ensimmäisenä nähtävä *Ikuruga*^[29] on tällä hetkellä sekä *Dreamcast*– että *Gamecube*-versiona kalliimpi kuin uutena, versiosta riippuen. Pelit myös jäivät todistetusti *Dreamcastin* viimeisiksi, esimerkiksi jo mainittu *Ikuruga* julkaistiin lopulta liiki kaksi

vuotta sen jälkeen, kun Sega oli lopettanut Dreamcastin valmistuksen. Esimerkiksi *Jaakko Suominen* on käyttänyt tämän tapaista aineistotriangulaatiota^[30] verratessaan aikalaisaineistoa keräämäänsä haastatteluaineistoon Suomen ensimmäistä pelikonsolibuumia tarkastellessaan^[31]. Tässä artikkelissa keskityn kuitenkin ainoastaan pelaajakertojan omaan muisteluun.

LET'S PLAY JA PELAAJAN MUISTI

Moni Let's Play on tehty käyttäen aineistona vanhoja, niin kutsutuksi retroksi mielletäviä pelejä^[32]. Osittain tässä tapauksessa on kyse laajemmasta, vanhojen pelien harrastamiseen keskittyvästä pelaajakulttuurista. Immersion ja pelikokemuksen myötä vanhemmat pelit ovat myös jättäneet väistämättömän jäljen aikansa peli- ja pelaajakulttuuriin^[33]. Pelataanpa-sarjan kaikki 79 osaa^[34] käsittelevät retroksi mielletäviä pelejä. Osittain tämä on luultavasti seurausta Heinosen omasta keräilyharrastuksesta, johon hän useassa sarjan osassa viittaa.

Tietyissä Pelataanpa-sarjan videoissa muistelu on selkeästi pääosassa, minkä Heinonen toisinaan ilmaisee jo videon otsikossa. Yksi tällaisista videoista on sarjan video *Kuusnepamuistoja*^[35], jossa Heinonen muistelee omaa lapsuuttaan ja pelaamistaan *Commodore 64* -kotitietokoneen parissa. Jo videon esittelyvaiheessa käy ilmi, millaisesta keronnasta videossa on kyse:

Tänään pelaillaan vaihteeksi Commodore 64:llä. Yhteinen nimittäjä peleille on se, että ne eivät ainakaan kaikki ole niitä ilmeisimpiä klassikoita, mutta niihin kaikkiin on itselläni henkilökohtainen suhde.

Muistelukerronnan ja pelaajakertojan henkilökohtaisen suhteen vuoksi tarkastelen kyseistä jaksoa hieman tarkemmin. Video alkaa osiolla *Chinese Juggler*^[36] -nimisestä pelistä. Peliin liittyy monenlaisia muistoja, erityisesti sen hankintaan:

Tämä peli tuli ostettua sillä tavalla, että kun kaikki aina sanoo että joo joo, kuusnelosella, sillä kopioitiin pelejä, että oli hirveet määrät itellä piraatteja ja niitä sitten kavereiden kanssa vaihdeltiin. Tämä voi olla totta, mutta itellä ei niitä koskaan ollut, koska ei ollut ketään, joka olisi niinku supplyttänyt niitä. Joten piti sitten vaan pelata niitä joita oli ja tärkeä juttu oli se, että paikallisessa kirjakaupassa oli 19 markan ja 39 markan pelejä ja sitten kun oli kauheaa uuden pelin himo, kaikki entiset oli pelattu, niin sitten sieltä piti jotain noilla viikkorahoilla kaivaa ja sit sieltä löytyi tällasia aarteita niinku tää Chinese Juggler.

Pelimuistot eivät siis liity välttämättä itse pelikokemukseen, vaan ne kytkeytyvät myös osaksi pelaajakertojan omia yleisempiä peleihin ja lapsuteen liittyviä muistoja. Muistelussa näkyy myös piirteitä yleisestä peleihin liittyvästä historiapuheesta^[37], jossa kertoja viittaa pelikulttuurin muutokseen. Lainauksesta on havaittavissa myös sosiaaliseen muistiin liittyvää omaelämäkerrallisuutta^[38]. Niinpä kaikki pelaamiseen liittyvät tarinat eivät välttämättä kytkeydy pelaamiseen itseensä, vaan jo pelkkä pelin hankkiminen voi olla tarinan arvoinen seikkailu. Esimerkiksi Youtube-käyttäjä *DSNadinen* tarina *Final Fantasy XIII*^[39] -pelin kymmentuntisesta jonotuksesta on tästä mainio osoitus^[40].

Chinese Juggleria käsittelevä osa Miiko Heinosen videosta sisältää myös muistelukerrontaa kyseisen pelin pelaamisesta ja sen mekaniikoista:

Se mitä tässä koko ajan vahingossa tekee on se, että heittää tota lautasta ilmaan mikä vaihtaa sen väriä... ja tässä on vähän vaikeeta aina tietää sitä paikkaa mihin toi lautanen sovitetaan.



Chinese Juggler Lähde: Pelataanpa: Kuusnepamuistoja – Youtube

Tässä tilanteessa pelaajakertoja ei varsinaisesti muistelee peliä itseään vaan sen sijaan tyytyy kertomaan, millaista kyseessä olevan pelin pelaaminen on. Kerronnan sävy on kuitenkin sellainen, että pelaajakertoja on selkeästi pelannut peliä aikaisemmin ja kertoo pelin ominaisuuksista tällä tavoin peliä kenties pelaamattomalle yleisölle. Pelin ominaisuuksien lisäksi pelaajakertoja kertoo myöhemmin pelistä laajemmin muistellen esimerkiksi pelin hankintatilannetta ja hankinta-ajan mediakulttuuria:

Ja siinä tosiaan oli, kun osti niitä halpoja pelejä, niin oli täysin sen amoiilla että mitä sieltä nyt sattuu tulemaan. Miltä ne takakansitekstit näytti ja millanen oli kansikuva, koska ei niiden arvosteluita ollut missään tai olisi ollut brittilehdissä joita ei tänne asti koskaan tullu ja taas se lehden ostaminenkin makso rahaa ja kun oli vähän rahaa, niin meluummin osti sitten sen pelin, tosin tuloksena oli sitten joskus ihan kamottava pettymys ja täyttä roskaa mut joskus sitten ihan mukavaakin pelattavaa.

Pelien itsensä lisäksi Let's Playt voivat sisällyttää muistelukerrontaa ajasta, jolloin peli julkaistiin. Tällä tavoin peli sitoutuu omaan julkaisujankohtaansa myös kulttuurituotteena. Jos peli julkaistiin nykyään, siitä olisi tarjolla tietoa huomattavasti enemmän ja helpommin. Aiemmin julkaisuhetkellä peleistä saatava tieto oli kuitenkin tiukassa pelaajakertojan mukaan.

Samalla Let's Playn kertontaan tulee mukaan myös elementtejä pelaajakertojan omasta lapsuudesta ja viikkorahojen käytöstä.

Usea Let's Play sisältää myös sisäistä intertekstuaalisuutta, eli viittauksia kerronnassa joko jakson itsensä, tai pelaajakertojan muiden jaksoiden välillä^[41]. Tämä tapa linkittää mediatuotteita toisiinsa on tuttu myös muusta peleihin liittyvästä populaarikulttuurista, kuten videopeliarvosteluista^[42]. Pelataanpa ei tee tähän asiaan poikkeusta:

Mä mainitsin tästä Pulterin-pelistä siinä Colecovision-jaksossa että tätä tuli pelattua paljon. Ja nyt mä lähinnä halusin kokeilla, et oliko tää kuusnelosversio helpompi, kun mulle jäi semmönen mielikuva, että tää olisi helpompi kun se tota noin Colecovisionin versio.

Suomessa muun muassa *Apu*-lehdessä aikanaan nähty yhdysvaltalaisen *Johnny Hartin* sarjakuva *Pulterin*^[43] kelpasi 1980-luvulla siis myös peliksi (*BC's Quest for Tires*^[44]) ja pelaajakertojalle ainakin peli on tuttu, kenties myös sarjakuva. Myös Pulterin pelimekaniikat herättävät pelaajakertojassa muistoja:

Ja sit välillä tulee tällasia tilanteita, et en tiä miten tosta olisi oikein pitänyt päästä. Sen mä muistan, et ainakaan vauhdin kiihdyttäminen tohon ei auta.

Videolla nähdään tilanne, josta pelin mekaniikalla olisi käytännössä mahdotonta päästä läpi. Pelaajakertoja ei onnistu selvittämään tilannetta tällä kertaa, mutta muistaa silti, mitä tilanteen selvittämiseksi ei ainakaan tule tehdä. Vastaavia kohtia tulee pelikerronnan aikana useita, mutta pelaajakertoja muistaa suurimman osan näistä, sekä myös pelin loppukohtauksen.



BC's Quest for Tires Lähde: Pelataanpa: Kuusnepamuistoja – Youtube

Pulteri kuuluu selvästi pelaajakertojan mielestä vaikeampaan päähän Commodore-pelejä, joten videolla esitellään myös rauhallisempi peli, *Traffix* [45]:

Nyt täs on se, et tää oli tosiaan suomennettu tää koko peli, mutta tää versio on nyt englanninkielinen ja lisäksi tää on lokalisoitu niin, että tässä ajetaan vasemmalla puolella, mikä tekee tästä hankalaa.

Suomenkielinen käännös tunnettiin nimellä *Liikennepeli* ja julkaistiin vuosi alkuperäisen *Traffixin* jälkeen [46]. Peli käännettiin myös esimerkiksi hollanniksi ja saksaksi. Tietoa suomenkielisestä versiosta on kuitenkin saatavilla hamillisen vähän. Esimerkiksi videogames.fi -tietokanta kertoo pelistä ainoastaan sen, että se on suomennettu [47]. Niinpä pelaajakertojan kokemus pelistä suomenkielisenä on mielenkiintoista tietoa, jota on muualta haasteellista löytää. Myös käsittelyssä olevasta käännöksestä opitaan videon aikana se, miten pelin lokalisaatio oli Englannissa viety myös pelimekaniikan asteelle ja liikenne oli oikeaoppisesti vasemmanpuoleista. Tällä tavoin pelin opetuksellinen tavoite liikennekysymyksiin palvelee oman yleisönsä tarvetta. Liikennepeli oli temmoltaan ja vauhdiltaan rauhallinen peli, mikä kerroksen mukaan sopi pelaajakertojalle mainiosti:

No miks mä tykkäsin tästä? No tää on kauheen rauhallista ja koska mä olin kauheen huono pelaaja, mitä oon tietysti nytki, nii semmonen kauheen raivoisa toiminta ei oikeen vedonnu ja tässä oli vähän ajatteluakin, et piti keksiä et missä se on se lähetin.



Traffix Lähde: Pelataanpa: Kuusnepamuistoja – Youtube

Samalla kun pelaajakertoja antaa katsojalle tietoa itsestään pelaajana, hän tuo samalla esiin myös oleellisia asioita pelin mekaniikoista ja luonteesta. Strateginen ajattelu ja rauhallinen eteneminen ovat selkeästi pelaajakertojan mieleen, joten *Liikennepeli* on selvästi päätynyt pelattavaksi useasti. Kyseessä on subjektiivinen kokemus pelistä, mutta pelaamiseen vaikuttivat myös Commodore-ajan tekniset haasteet:

No joo ja sit tässä oli tietysti se, et tää latas satakuuskyt kierrosta vissiin kasetilta, et sit kun se oli ladannu, niin sitä ei halunnu todellakaan sammuttaa, et sit myös pelattiin hampaat irvessä. Sama syy, kun olit ostanu pelin ja maksanu siitä, niin sitähan sit pelattiin, oli hyvä tai ei. Kun se latas kauan, niin sitä sit kans pelattiin. Ja tää oli täyshintanen peli ostaa.

Moni Commodore 64 -ajan elänyt muistaa kasettipelien pitkät latausajat. Lainauksessa on yhtä aikaa teknistä tietoa Commodore-pelien latausajoista, mutta samalla myös itsereflektivistä muistelua 1980-luvun pelaamisesta. Pitkän latausajan tuloksena pelaajakertoja halusi pelata peliä, joten kenties etenkin useammalla pelikerralla latausaika vaikutti myös pelin valintaan – latausajan palkintona pelaajakertoja halusi kenties saada itseään miellyttävää pelattavaa. Miellyttävällä Heinonen viittaa myös pelin vaikeustasoon. Heinosen mukaan C64-ajan pelit olivat haasteellisia, minkä vuoksi Liikennepeli tarjosi hieman rauhallisemman pelikokemuksen.

Tää myös tuntuu aika paljon helpommalta ku sillon, mut ehkä tää sillonki oli helpommasta päästä ja täytyy tässä kiinnittää huomiota siihen, et siis hyvin iso osa kuusnelospeleistä oli muhaavan vaikeita, koska tarkoitus niinkun, se syvyys tuli siitä vaikeudesta ja sillon alottelevalle pelaajalle ei ollu paljon amoa jaossa.

Kokemusvaikeustasosta on subjektiivinen ja siksi vaikea osoittaa pelkän muistelun perusteella todeksi. Samankaltaisia kokemuksia on löydyttävissä muualtakin. Esimerkiksi Lemon 64 -yhteisö muistelee myös vaikeita Commodore 64-pelejä keskustelupalstallaan ketjussa *"Most difficult game ever (c64)"* [48]. Keskustelussa nousee esiin useita yhteisön vaikeiksi mieltäviä pelejä, kuten *China Miner* [49]. Jos Commodore-pelien vaikeustasosta haluaisi siis saada hyvän kuvan, pelaajien itsensä mielipide on oleellinen. Samalla myös pelaajakertojen ja keskustelupalstojen ohella myös pelilehtiä aikalaisarvostelut ovat hyvä lähde tämänkaltaisen tiedon etsimiselle.

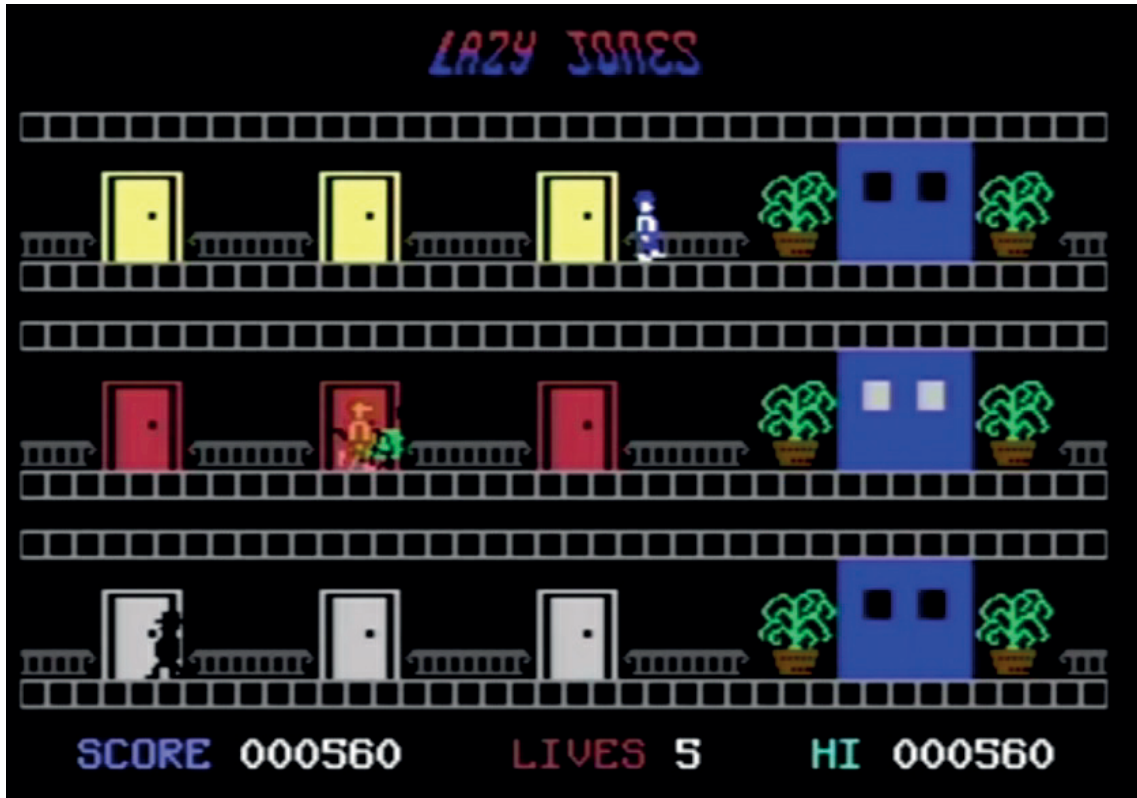
Peleihin saattaa sisältyä myös sosiaaliseen elämään liittyviä muistoja, sekä tietynlaista aikalaismuistelua pelien sisällön osalta. *Lazy Jones*^[50]-nimistä peliä käsittelevässä osiossa Heinonen muistelee seuraavasti:

Ja mulla ei itselläni ollut tätä vaan mun kaverilla oli ja tää oli jotenkin niinku aivan ihmeellistä että niinku peli, jonka sisällä on niinku pelejä, ei ollu todellakaan kaheksytnejiä vuonna yleistä tällönnen minipelikokoelma.

Lazy Jonesia pelattiin siis kaverin luona ja pelin rakenteen Heinonen muistelee olevan aivan erityistä vuonna 1984. Heinonen viittaa aiemmissa repliikeissä itsekin *Nintendon Wariorware*^[51]-pelisarjaan, joka käytti samaa perusajatus rakenteen suhteen lähes kaksi vuosikymmentä myöhemmin. Niinpä *Lazy Jones* olikin varmasti tietynlainen edelläkävijä omalla sarallaan. *Lazy Jones* ei kuitenkaan ole Heinosen mielestä kestänyt aikaa, sillä pelin yleinen vaikeustaso, rytmitys ja modemeihin peleihin verrattuna vaihtelun puute nakertavan kokonaisuutta:

En mä tiedä, ei aika välttämättä tälle oo kauheen kiltti ollu. Vähän sellanen ikääntyminen, tota, lähinnä se, että nää pikkusen kestää liian kauan nää pelit ja vaihtelua on vähän vähän, mutta.

Pelin eri minipelit siis kestävät Heinosen mielestä liian pitkään, eikä pelejä ole riittävästi erilaisia. On mahdollista, että Heinonen vertaa pelikokemustaan juuri edellä mainittuun *Wariorware*-sarjaan, joissa erilaisia minipelejä on paljon erilaisia ja ne kestävät vain muutaman sekunnin kuluihin. Niinpä muisteltu erityisyys ei ole enää yhtä kiinnostavaa pelin kannalta kuin yli kolmekymmentä vuotta sitten. Samalla lainauksesta voidaan huomata myös peliarvostelunlaisia piirteitä, jossa vanha peli asetetaan nykypäivän pelejä vastaan kriittisessä valossa.



Lazy Jones Lähde: Pelataanpa: Kuusnepamuistoja – Youtube

Kokonaisuutena aineistosta voidaan havaita, miten Let's Play ei tähän kontekstiin laitettuna kerro ainoastaan yhdestä pelikokemuksesta, vaan antaa kuvaa myös pelaamisen historiasta kokonaisuutena. Pelien saatavuus, pelijoumalismin nousu, pelikokemusten muuttuminen ja omien pelitaitojen eräänlainen nohohtuminen ovat jatkuvasti osa kerontaa. Heinonen ei ole suinkaan ainoa pelaajakertoja, joka käyttää tämäntyyliä muistelukerronnan keinoja videoissaan. Muita suosittuja esimerkkejä ovat *James Rolfen* esittämä *Angry Video Game Nerd*^[52] sekä tämän vastakohta, *Derek Alexanderin* esittämä *Happy Video Game Nerd*^[53], jotka sitovat usein pelaamansa pelin sekä pelihistorian tapahtumiin että omaan pelaajahistoriaansa, usein myös erilaisiin huumorin keinoihin. Pelivideoiden kautta peleistä voi tietysti myös oppia pelin mekaniikkaa ja mahdollisia läpäsäilyntekniikoita^[54], mutta kuten *Jesper Juul* on todennut, pelivideoiden katsominen ei vastaa pelaamista itseään^[55].

LOPUKSI

Aineistosta on havaittavissa selkeästi se, millaista muistelua Let's Play voi sisältää. Muistelu ei sisällä ainoastaan peliin itseensä liittyviä muistoja, vaan myös pelin pelaamiseen, sen hankintaan, pelilaitteistoon ja myös pelin aikaa ympäröineeseen yhteiskuntaan liittyviä muistoja. Let's Play ei ole haastatteluaihe, mikä suuremmissa mittakaavoissa tuo esille myös sen ongelmallisuuden muistutietoaineistona. Kaikki Let's Playt eivät sisällä pelaajakertojan omaa muistelua ja kokemusta peilausta pelatussa pelissä, vaan keskittyvät sen sijaan enemmän pelitapahtumien sen hetkiseen kerronnallistamiseen tai esimerkiksi peliin luodun hahmon tarinan kertomiseen. Let's Play on samalla myös täysin omaehtoisia kerontaa, eikä vastaa mihinkään ennalta luotun kysymykseen. Koska Let's Play -tarinoiden määrä on valtava, muistelua ja sen kautta kokemuksellista kerontaa sisältävien tarinoiden etsiminen on haasteellista, eikä kaikista kerronnallistetuista peleistä ole löydettävissä pelaajakertojaista historia-aineistoa.

Muistelukerontaa sisältävä Let's Play antaa dokumentoinnin arvoista informaatiota esimerkiksi digitaalista museointia tai pelikokemuksen tutkimiseen tarvittavaa taustatietoa varten. Jo peleistä itsestään luodut tarinat ovat sellaisia. Digitaalisten pelien taustatietoa kerätessä pelaajatarinoita ei voida jättää täysin huomiotta, sillä jos peliä tarkastellaan objektina, on myös tärkeää tietää, millaista sitä oli pelata. Nykyinen Let's Play -ilmiö tuottaa tällaista tietoa erittäin hyvin, vaikka kaikki Let's Playt eivät suoraan muistelukerontaa sisältäisiäkään. Sen sijaan jokainen Let's Play kertoo tarinan pelaajasta pelin parissa. Toisaalta, kuten Niklas Nylund artikkelissaan huomauttaa, Let's Playt ovat aina oman aikansa tuotteita ja on mahdotonta arvioida, ymmärtävätkö niiden katsojat kymmenen vuoden päästä vielä niiden sisältöä ja tematiikkaa^[56]. Tämä myös problematisoi Let's Play -kerontaa esimerkiksi digitaalisen museoinnin näkökulmasta.

Kerätyn muistutiedon käyttöarvo on niin ikään pohdinnan arvoinen asia. Petri Saarikoski esitti Salon taidemuseon Pelaa! -näyttelyä käsittelevässä katsauksessaan kysymyksen siitä, miten takavuosien pelaajakulttuurista olisi mahdollista antaa museoympäristössä mahdollisimman oikeanlainen kuva. Lisäksi Saarikoski huomautti, että museointia varten haasteellisin kohderyhmä ovat he, joille peleillä ei ole omaa tartuntapintaa^[57]. Digitaalisten pelien kulttuuriarvo on kuitenkin huomattava, sillä niiden historiallinen tausta yltää lähes yhtä kauas kuin tietokoneiden historia ylipäätään^[58].

Let's Playn avulla digitaalisista peleistä on pelaamatta mahdollista oppia asioita, joita pelikokemusta pelin fyysisistä kappaleista, kuvakaappauksista tai edes pelkkää videoitua pelisuoritusta katsomalla olisi mahdoton havaita. Pelaajan ulottuvuus, se millaiselta peli tuntui pelata, millaisia muistoja siihen liittyy ja miten peli linkittyi pelihistorian kirjoitukseen pelaajan näkökulmasta, ovat digitaalisten pelien kontekstissa tärkeitä asioita tiedostaa.

Let's Playn aikana kerrottuja muistoja on mahdollista verrata kirjallisesti dokumentoituihin tapahtumiin ja käsitellä tuotettua tietoa ensisijaisesti kokemuksellisenä lisänä pelihistorian tapahtumiin. Vertaamalla muistelukerontaa ja aikalaissähteitä, Let's Play tuo oman osansa lisäksi esimerkiksi tietyn aikakauden ja ilmiön historialliseen tarkasteluun.

Useampaa eri muistutietolähdettä, keskustelupalstakekusteluita ja peliarvioita yhdistelemällä yhdestä pelistä on mahdollista saada aikaan kuva, jossa pelin itsensä lisäksi myös pelikokemus ja sen mahdollinen henkilökohtainen vaikutus on nostettavissa esiin. Siitä huolimatta Let's Play tässä tarkoituksessa käytettynä osoittaa sen, miten pelaajalähtöinen kertova kulttuuri on tärkeä ja huomioitava osa modernia pelikulttuuria muutenkin kuin viitteellisistä näkökulmista.

Kirjoittaja on filosofian maisteri, joka tekee väitöskirjaansa Jyväskylän yliopistossa. Artikkelit on kirjoitettu Suomen Akatemian rahoittamassa tutkimushankkeessa *Ludification and the Emergence of Playful Culture* (276012).

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III

THE FOUNDATIONS OF LET'S PLAY - LIVE ACTION REPRESENTATION OF VIDEO GAMES IN TELEVISION AND ONLINE 1975-2018

by

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The foundations of Let's Play – Live action representation of video games in television and online 1975-2018

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Abstract: In this article, I look at television shows based on video games in comparison to modern Let's Play –videos. The paper draws a timeline from the earliest shows to modern days and discusses the evolution of video games representation throughout the years. For the study, I gathered a global dataset of old television programs about the subject and categorized the findings. When comparing the narrative and representation of the television shows with Let's Plays, the study suggests that even though there are some similar elements between the two, they are still cultural products of their own. As Let's Plays are more narrative products than the television shows, they are a phenomenon of their own. The study shows that the television shows contribute more to the cultural activity and legacy of watching other people play.

Keywords: Video games, television, Let's Play.

1 Introduction

Watching others play has also been a part of video gaming culture for a long time. Gathering around a television or an arcade machine, while someone is playing was a social way to experience games [15, 22]. This kind of social aspect has been an important part of the culture, as even early video game commercials depicted this [16].

Video games have been a part of print and live action media since their first success in the late 1970's. Roughly, the media attention divides into two main categories: the written texts, such as reviews and guides in video game magazines and live action footage as seen in for example television shows and separately sold VHS-tapes.

These days live action video gaming has moved more and more to internet. One of the most popular forms of online video is Let's Play (abbr. LP), in which a player or players plays a chosen video game while commenting the game at the same time. Emerging 2006 at the discussion forums of Something Awful, Let's Plays have become a big part of online video culture and a very important phenomenon in the whole video game scene [5].

In this article, I will take a closer look into the history of different visual representations around video games, more specifically the video game –based television shows. The aim of the research is to find some evidence from the history about the possible elements of the mediated video gaming of old that might have given especially the contemporary amateur Let's Players some influence for their hobby.

What possible similarities do these shows share with the narrative and visual representation of video gaming in modern online videos and what kind of evolution happened in the structure of the shows towards modern age? How have these shows talked about video games throughout the years and how they present them?

I look at the shows globally, because taking sources from only one country would severely limit the amount of material used in the research, thus also limiting the scope of the research. By taking a global focus, it is also possible to see the possible changes in genres and productions towards the digital age. Many of the shows also aired globally through satellite and cable. The focus of this article is in the shows that represent actual video games found in arcades and stores. There has been several different shows with gamified elements in them, but with games exclusively made for broadcast use.

I collected the database for the article between winter 2018 and spring 2019. Currently the data consists of 150 different television shows and channels from 28 different countries. Sources for the data varies, ranging from for example online articles and blogs [3] and forum posts [18] to official marketing material [19]. For some global shows, I used localized Wikipedia-articles with their sources. For example, this was the case with Japanese shows [20].

The data consists of the name of the show, show format, years of running, country of production, the original broadcasting channel, producers, original time slot and possible weblinks with extra information. The different formats include game shows, participatory shows, magazine shows and lifestyle shows¹. Due to language barriers, the categories have been determined by watching the shows from different sources, e.g. Youtube and Daily Motion. If the show was not available online, the determination based on descriptions of the shows found from message boards and social media. All of the shows discussed in this article are available online, and the analysis bases on the viewed footage.

2 Video games in live action media

The most usual examples of the early days of game-based television were game shows, which mixed trivia questions and video gaming. The NBC show *The Magnificent Marble Machine* (1975-1976) with its enormous pinball machine in the studio was one of the most notable predecessors in these types of game shows.

The earliest example of a television game show based on video games was *Starcade* (United States 1982-1984), a game show where contestant played arcade games together. The show ran for 130 episodes before its cancellation [3]. What really targeted the show to the gaming audience of the time were the questions that were about video and arcade games. Therefore to win in *Starcade*, nimble fingers was not enough of a skill, you also had to know a thing or two about the games. The questions lead to an interesting note: just as in traditional game shows, the audience could also learn something about the games via the trivia. *Starcade*'s idea of trivia questions about video games is also present in shows such as *Super Mario Club*² (Japan 1990-1993) and its

¹ As many shows especially after 1990's featured many different genre-specific elements, the definition of genre is difficult. Therefore, the preliminary category is defined by the focus of the show.

² Original title スーパーマリオクラブ

followers *Super Mario Stadium*³ (Japan 1993-1996) and *64 Mario Stadium*⁴ (Japan 1996-2000).

This brings up an interesting notion. As the footage of the gameplay might give the audience ludic strategies for the game shown [24], the questions and the answers provide metatextual information surrounding the games and video game culture to the viewers, much like many Let's Players do [5].

The game shows treat the games as something special. The contestants have to win something else before they can get to playing. From the narrative perspective, even though there is not much narration in the game shows apart from the host's friendly banter and the players' enthusiastic talk, some vocal reactions are present. The visual focus is on the player and the game, which stages the event of video gaming like the audience was there witnessing the occasion. Even in the early days, the gameshows featured close-ups from the players' faces, which made it possible for the audience to see the emotions the heat of the game brought up.

Fig. 1. Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge (The United States 1988)



Following the success of the Nintendo Entertainment System and Sega Master System, television media started to feature video games again more often in their own television shows. Along with regular video game magazines, television took also part in the video game journalism providing video game reviews, hints and news.

Some print magazines hosted their own television shows. For example *GamePro TV* (Great Britain 1991, 1996-1997), which was made to side with the *GamePro Magazine* and *GameWave*⁵ (Japan 1998-2002), collaborating with *Famitsu* magazine. In some

³ Original title スーパーマリオスタジアム

⁴ Original title 64マリオスタジアム

⁵ Original title ゲームウェーブ

cases, the shows spawned print magazines. This happened with for example *New Reality*⁶ (Russia 1994-1998) and *Top Kids* (Argentina 1994-1995).

During the 1990's, the magazine shows started to appear in wide array of different countries. Many of the shows featured video game reviews and news in the side of competitive gameplay and game show –elements. Where *Power Play* (Netherlands 1992-1993) focused on reviews and news, *VideoXOC* (Catalonia 1992-1995) and *X Base* (Germany 1994-1995) incorporated competitive gaming, audience letters and much more to the magazine format. Some magazine shows had also a broader focus, covering e.g. movies, music and comics as well as video games. This was the case with for example *Trolspejlet* (Denmark 1989-still running) and *L33t* (Italy 2006-2007).

Some magazine shows continued their life in the internet as online shows. These shows include *Tilt!* (Finland 1997-current), *Arcadia* (Guatemala 2008-current) and *Re-Play* (Czech Republic 2009-current). Despite moving the shows online, the format in the shows still follows closely to the television equivalents.

The representation of video gaming in these shows is quite varying. The competitive parts show lot more gameplay than the reviews. Usually the magazine shows tried to cover as much as possible in one episode, because of which the length of the footage from the games was usually very short. Because of this, the magazine shows are closer in style to modern Youtube-shows that discuss the games from a historical or journalistic angle than Let's Plays.

Few of the more peculiar types of shows were the participatory video game shows, where the audience took part in the games by calling into the show. The earliest example of these is perhaps *TV Powww!* (1978-1990), where viewers could call in to the show with their telephones and participate in the game seen on television. The show was distributed widely first over USA, then internationally. The game played by shouting "POW!" to the telephone, which lead to a pixelated bullet fired from the cannon seen on the television screen. The exact date of when the use of the format ceased is unknown, but apparently, the format aired in Australia and Italy still as late as 1990 [1].

In 1988, Danish television company TV2 asked programmer *Ivan Sölvason* to program a video game that played in a television game show. Upon request, Sölvason came up with *OsWALD*, later *Super OsWALD*, the interactive video game program, in which the audience could play in the broadcast with their telephones at home. [17]

OsWALD was a Danish thing and never aired outside Denmark, but *Hugo* (Denmark 1990-2009) became a big thing worldwide and broadcasted in over 40 countries worldwide. Like in *OsWALD*, the audience could try to participate in the game with their own telephones. The main character, Hugo the Troll, controlled by pressing buttons on the telephone accordingly to the instructions given on screen. Hugo's success lead to a couple more shows like it, such as *Pizza Rollo* (France 1994-1995), *Joe Razz* (Sweden 1994), *Throat and Neck* (Denmark/Brazil 1997-1999) and *Galilei the Dog* (Finland 1996-1997). Some shows incorporated console video gaming into the play-by-phone –format. Most notable shows of this kind are *Games World* (Great Britain/Germany 1993-1998), *Game Over* (Finland 1994-1997) and *Maxihra* (Slovakia 1997-2000)

⁶ Original title Новая Реальность

The play-by-phone –shows featured more detailed gameplay footage than the magazine shows, even though only for a couple of minutes per game. Obviously, the players are not visible on the screen and they are audible only at the beginning and at the end of each game. The host is therefore also the game narrator. Because of the limited technology, the gameplay on screen never really represented how the game would play on an actual controller, but served as a chance to see someone else play nevertheless.

Fig. 2. Game Over (Finland 1994-1997)



One of the more interesting television shows is *Subido* (Finland 2002). The show consisted mainly of just playing and showing video games with celebrity guests, but with a laid-back style that was quite close to many Let's Plays of today. What made *Subido* stand out from other shows of this kind, was the audience's commentary, sent as text messages to the show and then presented on the screen as the people played. The guests and hosts in the show also reacted to these text messages, in a way communicating with the audience. The similarities between the concept of *Subido* and modern Twitch.tv –streams are quite remarkable.

This kind of audience reflection is comparable to the reflective narration of modern Let's Plays [5, 14]. By the time of *Subido*, mobile technology made it possible to send text messages to the show, unlike in the shows of the early 1990's. Earlier the audience had to send traditional letters, faxes or post cards to the broadcasting company.

There are a couple of other examples of television shows resembling more the style of Let's Plays. Earliest example of this kind of representation is *The Game Power*⁷ (Japan 1991-1994), where different gamers give playing tips to audience while playing a short amount of the game. It seems that even closer example is *Me in Mir* (Great Britain/Italy 1999-2006). Very little information of the show is available, but it appears that the show was about the host playing online role-playing game called *Legend of Mir* as different types of characters in each episode. Instead of playing by the rules, the idea was to mess around with the other players in different manners.

*Game Center CX*⁸ (Japan 2003-current) is one of the shows regarded as a starting point of Let's Play [10, 14]. In the show, Japanese comedian *Shinya Arino* plays old video games. The whole idea of the game show was to show Arino's comedic reactions to these games, while he was desperately trying to complete the difficult classics. Along with Arino's reactions, one notable element in the show is the interaction between Arino, the narrator of the show and the studio audience. Therefore, the narration of one episode works in multiple layers, much like modern Let's Plays. Another show, *Game Record GP*⁹ (Japan 2007-2011) followed *Game Center CX*'s example, but instead of just one player, the show featured multiple Japanese celebrities with the task of playing old Famicom/PC Engine -games.

Fig. 3. *Tsurega/つれゲー* (Japan 2010-2016)



It also seems that during the last few years, the television shows are starting to take influence from the online shows. Shows such as *Shooting Game Sukyakudanjun*¹⁰ (Japan 2009) and *Tsurega*¹¹ (Japan 2010-2016) are good examples of this. Especially

⁷ Original title Theゲームパワー

⁸ Original title ゲームセンターCX

⁹ Original title ゲームレコードGP

¹⁰ Original title シューティングゲーム攻略軍団参上!

¹¹ Original title つれゲー

the latter is very much broadcasted Let's Playing, with two women playing a selected game and commenting over it without any other purpose than just playing. Even the visual framing of the show seems to be very close to Youtube-videos. Also worth mentioning is *PlayHit* (Brazil 2006-current), which combines pre-recorded gameplay footage and popular music to create often-humorous video game music videos.

As it seems that many of these shows featuring Let's Play -like narration and representation are from Japan, it is still unlikely that most of these shows would have affected the beginnings of the Let's Play -scene. Most of the Japanese shows never made it abroad, because of the cultural differences and the language barrier [4]. Therefore, it is plausible that these shows are mostly unknown in the west. However, in the past few years, some western shows have started adopting different ways of representing video game play. These shows include *The First Hour* (Great Britain 2013-2017), *Dara O Briain's Go 8 Bit* (Great Britain 2016-2018) and *Parker Plays* (USA 2017-current), which are all based on narrative gaming in the style of a Let's Play.

4 Comparison to Let's Play

A Let's Play consists roughly of three different parts. The main thing is the gameplay, either as a video or as still images. Second thing is the player-narrator, the individual or individuals playing the game. Third part is the story the player-narrator tells, the story about playing a video game. [5]

This story of playing a game has many aspects to it. Player-narrators share playing tips and techniques to the audience, reveal some opinions about the game at hand and react to events in the game with emotion. They also sometimes make intertextual connections with the game and other popular culture, interact with their audience and share some insight into their lives outside video gaming. In this sense, Let's Plays are quite close to live streaming and speedrunning. [5, 23]

One particular style of narration is very distinct to Let's Plays. The character stories or avatar role-playing, where the narrator creates a fictional character in the game. This way the narrator tells the original story of the game in a different way [21]. With the exception of these more storified Let's Plays, quite many modern Let's Plays also feature footage of the player-narrator, making the reactions and emotions towards the game visible. This imagery adds another visual layer on top of the game, giving the audience an insight to how the game might feel like to play [23].

Even though there are many similarities between all recorded footage and gameplay footage [9], there are also some big differences. One major difference between the television shows and the internet videos is that the Let's Play -videos usually tackle only one game at a time. This way it is possible to get more insight into the game at hand and have more background information about it. This could be due to the amateur/professional-duality of youtubing. Youtubers are able to write their webisodes how they like and not try to appeal to a large mass of television viewers [2]. However, with the television shows, the main purpose with a few exceptions was to show footage of as many games as possible. Especially the magazine shows served also a journalistic purpose, in side of a marketing one.

Because of this, the LP's are also possible to consider as a method of video game preservation, especially when the LP shows a considerable amount of footage from the

video game and/or when the narrator links memories about the game into the narration [6, 10]. This seems not to be the case with the television shows. They are cultural products of their own and as they show only a small portion of the actual gameplay, the representation of the games does not stand as remarkable as the show in whole.

Also from a narrative point of view, LP's differ quite a lot from the television shows. The clearest example of this is the pace of narration. While in LP's the narration is continuous, in the television shows it is more sporadic and focuses on many other things than just the game itself. Especially in the earlier television shows, the main narrator is the host of the show, rather than the player.

Let's Players however often reflect their audience during the commentary [5]. While in the television shows the hosts also usually acknowledges the audience, the audience does not affect the show. In Let's Plays and online streams it is on the contrary quite common for the narrator to interact with the audience and to even take some tips and tricks for the game this way.

What these shows do have in common with Let's Play and streaming, is watching someone else play the game on the screen. Especially in shows where the players are present in the studio and visible for the audience, the emotions of the player, the excitement and perhaps even the ultimate failure are some of the key components of modern Let's Play [5].

One reason for television production companies and stations taking ideas from the internet shows is obvious: the advertising money has moved more and more from television to internet. Therefore, the television shows have a need to cut costs and find new ways to find their audience. This is very much applicable to video game shows. [7, 11, 12]

5 Conclusion

In the light of history, it is clear that Let's Plays are very much something original, but they do share some elements with the television shows of the past. One of the main differences between the television shows and LP's is the representation of the video game at hand. In television, only a small portion of the gameplay was shown, where as in LP's the main idea is to show as much of the gameplay as possible.

Although it is evident that Something Awful and The Let's Play Archive coined the term "Let's Play" and created the whole phenomenon, the elements of which the Let's Plays consist have been out there in the media for a long time. Even though the shows for the main part are not Let's Plays, they still seem to contribute to the legacy of watching other people play video games. This is because the main similarities between the television shows and Let's Plays are in how the player experience is represented and narrated in especially the game shows.

There seems to be more things in common in watching the shows than producing them. The reasons are evident: the excitement of watching someone play a game, maybe comparing skills with the player or maybe even learning something new in the process. This does not apply to magazine shows however, as in those the gameplay is pre-recorded and is limited only in short and edited clips needed for the reviews.

The television shows are also quite far from the Let's Plays themselves in means of the narration. Still, the aspect of seeing someone else play on the television and later,

taking part in the television show from your own home is one of the crucial aspects of how players wanted to show their gaming skills to the wide public and to watch how others performed in a video game.

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IV

EARLY TELEVISION VIDEO GAME TOURNAMENTS AS SPORTS SPECTACLES

by

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EARLY TELEVISION VIDEO GAME TOURNAMENTS AS SPORTS SPECTACLES

ABSTRACT

This article looks at two televised video game tournaments from the 1980's from the viewpoint of sports spectacle. Through the analysis of the television episodes and comparison to modern eSports-scene, the aim is to see, if there were similarities or differences between sports broadcasting and video game broadcasting at the time. The article suggests that because of visual choices made in sports broadcasting, the video game tournaments adapted this style coincidentally, which might have affected the style of eSports-broadcasting later.

1 INTRODUCTION

Competing in video games in a popular sport these days. Online streams and even some television shows create a spectacular atmosphere around these tournaments and the best players are now celebrities. Electronic sports (eSports) events are broadcasted widely over the internet and television. Watching others play has been a big part of video game culture since the arcade ages. Gathering around an arcade machine and cheering on the people playing was an important part of the whole arcade experience (see Newman 2004 & Kocurek 2015).

Many of the online streams through services such as Twitch gather broad audiences globally, reaching amounts of individual viewers topping even some physical sports events. According to Activate, a consulting company focused of technology, there are currently over 250 million individual eSports-viewers. Activate also predicts that if the growth in the amount of viewers stays stable, then by 2021 a single eSports final can reach over 80 million individual viewers, which would be more than in for example professional basketball and baseball. By that time, Activate estimates that the total amount of individual eSports-viewers should double to 500 million viewers¹.

In this article, I will look at two 1980's televised video game tournaments from the viewpoint of the spectacle. The two tournaments discussed are *That's Incredible! Video Game Invitational* and *Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge*. Through these two episodes, I will look at the purpose and formation of a spectacle in a televised video game tournament and compare the analysis to modern day eSports-spectacles. Through this, I am aiming to find how the video game spectacles compare to sports spectacles and how the spectacle has evolved throughout the years.

2 THE SPORTS SPECTACLE AND VIDEO GAMES

There are multiple ways of creating audiovisual spectacles and many different viewpoints on how to look and interpret them. Based on Guy Debord's view of the spectacle in his book *Society of Spectacle* (1967), Douglas Kellner builds on Debord's views, arguing that especially media spectacles dramatize and highlight some phenomena and values of the contemporary time. Via this, the sports spectacle serves as a form of commercialization and a promoter of nationalism (Kellner 2003, 2–3; 66–70). Marcella Szablewicz researched Chinese eSports-scene based on Kellner's opinion of spectacles, looking at the live event from the viewpoint of

¹ <https://onlinebusiness.syr.edu/blog/esports-to-compete-with-traditional-sports/>

audience and politics. Szablewicz argues that in China, competitive gaming is in a way a promoter of nationalism and ideology through the audience. The spectacle in this case is merely a façade. (Szablewicz 2015, 260–262; 269–271). Rory Summerley also notes, that there are similarities between the institutionalization between traditional sports and eSports in the sense how both aim to propagate their sports through big events, rulesets and philosophy (Summerley 2019, 7 & 15).

By looking at the coeval sports research with the shows discussed in this paper, it is evident that there are also some similarities with the presentation of the shows and sports broadcasting of the 1980's. As Robert Gruneau wrote, the action in sports broadcast must be immediate and take the television audience to the event, as if they were there. This involves many different choices regarding what to show and what camera angles and lighting to use (Gruneau 1989, 134–135). With these choices, it is possible to capture the drama within one single match in a distinctive way that differentiates the television viewing experience from being at the audience. The choices made are artistic and very dependable on the director of the broadcast (Morris & Nydahl, 1985). As an example, when a usual sporting event is shot from multiple camera angles, where they show the athletes emotions, reactions of the audience and statistics with graphical overlay, a simple athletic performance becomes a drama.

Spectating play has followed video game culture, according to Sjöblom & Hamari (2017), through LAN-parties to watching modern online streams (Sjöblom & Hamari 2017, 986). Cheung and Huang (2011) found from their interview data about spectating Starcraft that the viewers appreciated the clarity of action, with clear indications in the screen of how the game was playing out and who was at the moment winning the game. This allowed the interviewees to understand the game flow and feel suspense during the game, even though some of them had never even played the game themselves (Cheung & Huang 2011, 768–769).

Allegedly, the first “Video Game World Championships” took place at 1982 at Twin Galaxies Arcade located at Ottumwa, Iowa. The co-founder of U.S. National Video Game Team and the owner of the Twin Galaxies arcade, *Walter Day*, had already gotten some notable media attention with the high score lists in the arcade. Days’ connections to the media resulted in an arcade-themed article and photoshoot in the *Life* magazine and in February 1983, a feature live arcade competition in *That’s Incredible* (Patterson 2017; Taylor 2012, 4). The show shortly covered the original tournament before moving on to the actual competition. The episode was not the first time the show features live action arcade gaming, as there was a Ms. Pac-Man tournament a year before. The “Olympic finals” however, got more attention later² ³.

The episode starts with a recap from the Twin Galaxies tournament. The three hosts of the show each at a time narrate something about the tournament, whether it be the location, the games, or the structure of the tournament. After the introduction, the hosts introduce the three contestants and the structure of the competition while at the same time introducing the games. The players competed in five different games: *Cosmos*⁴, *BurgerTime*⁵, *Millipede*⁶, *Donkey Kong*

² “That’s Incredible” Broadcasts History’s First Video Game World Championship (1983).

https://dangerousminds.net/comments/thats_incredible_broadcasts_historys_first_video_game_world_championship_19

³ The Golden Age Arcade Historian: That’s Incredible – The North American Video Game Olympics.

<http://allincolorforaquarter.blogspot.com/2013/02/thats-incredible-north-american-video.html>

⁴ Century Electronics 1981

⁵ Data East 1982

*Jr.*⁷ and *Buck Rogers*⁸. Each of the game had a point goal, which the players needed to meet in order to progress to the next game. After getting enough points in the last game, the final objective was to run through a ribbon on stage for the victory. In the television set, we find three units of each arcade cabinet – 15 cabinets in total. Each player has a designated arcade machine to play with, as well as an arrow-pointed route from cabinet to another. The goal line is right in the middle of the stage, therefore completing the racetrack of the competition.

That's Incredible came to the end of its run almost precisely a year after the big live tournament. However, producer Alan Landsburg wanted to have another go with the format a couple of years later. The show, Incredible Sunday (1988-1989) again featured a live video game competition in one of the episodes. Whereas in the Video Game World Championships the prize was to get to the finals that aired on live television, in 1988 the stakes were a bit higher. The U.S. National Video Game Team®, founded in 1983, was on a lookout for new players and the winner earned a spot on the team. (Patterson 2017). This time the players competed in only three Nintendo Entertainment System -games, *Super Mario Bros. 2*⁹, *Ice Hockey*¹⁰ and *Rad Racer*¹¹. However, Atari endorsed The U.S. National Video Game Team officially just a year earlier. The team members even appeared in children's prime time television advertising the Atari 7800 console, which was set out to compete with Nintendo NES and Sega Master System (Patterson 2017). One reason for the show to opt for Nintendo over Atari could have been the install base of the consoles at the time of the tournament. By the end of 1987, the NES had sold about 4,1 million units, whereas Atari had moved only 1,6 million consoles in the same time (Matthews 2009; Majaski 1988). Apparently, Nintendo moved over 7 million NES consoles in North America in 1988, as the console became so popular during the holiday season of 1987, that the stores were bought empty of the NES's (Suominen 2015, 79). This makes the marketing and commercialized point of view evident in the tournament.

Again, the competition took inspiration from the world of sport, as the main objective was to reach a given point in the game as fast as possible. In *Super Mario Bros. 2*, the objective was to complete the given level faster than the others did. In *Ice Hockey*, the players needed to score three goals against a computer opponent and in *Rad Racer* complete the given level faster than the competition. This time just finishing the game was enough, as there was no final ribbon to run through. This is especially interesting when comparing the competition format to other video game tournaments in the 1980's. Competing for high score in a given game was the usual task, but most of the time, there was only one game to compete in – in fact, the whole tournament usually revolved around just one game, like the *Space Invaders Competition* or the *Pac-Man Championships in Finland* (Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018).

Visually, the similarities to a sports broadcast are evident. With the divided imagery showing scores, players' emotions and the game itself, the artistic direction aims to capture the intensity and the drama of the competition. When the camera zooms out to a wider image, the racetrack is clearly visible, showing how the players run from a cabinet to another. In these wider images, the audience is also visible on screen. The play-by-play commentary of the hosts dominates the

⁶ Atari 1982

⁷ Nintendo 1982

⁸ Sega 1982

⁹ Nintendo 1988

¹⁰ Nintendo 1988

¹¹ Square 1987

audio and the audiences' reactions to the events on stage can also be heard. Therefore, the episodes focus more on the competition than the games. What mistakes the other two players might have made, is very unclear to the television audience. Even though there are large portions of the games shown, the competitive element takes over the visual narrative.

This brings up an important notion: playing just one game for high score would not probably have given the same excitement than playing several in a row. For television audience, a fast-paced race for win probably seemed like a more entertaining choice of format. In addition, having multiple games played in the show was clearly more profitable for marketing and advertising. From the viewpoint of the spectacle, this creates quite the contradiction: the games presented are new and something that the producers and the game companies wanted to promote through these special episodes, but the performance of playing steals the show. The choices made in the presentation are therefore quite alike to sports broadcasting, as the event and the competitors are taken into visual account much like in a traditional sports broadcasting. The games are the sport and the player are the athletes. In comparison, the Todd Holland – movie *The Wizard*¹² features multiple Nintendo Entertainment System –games from the late 1980's throughout the film, as well as different Nintendo accessories. The final tournament in the movie, the *Video Armageddon*, that takes place in the Universal Studios Theme Park, is visually presented much alike the two aforementioned televised tournaments, but also the Nintendo World Championships in 1990. The actual tournament was not televised, so therefore the movie promoted not only the NES-games and –accessories, but in a way the tournament itself.

By the time *Incredible Sunday* was out, there were only a handful of other shows airing in other parts of the world. Therefore the only ways to see live action video gaming in television - disregarding commercials – were these shows and the separately sold VHS-tapes made by the video game companies or for example the U.S. National Video Game Team. In the 1980's North American video game industry was still at the same time steadily growing and in the later years of the decade recovering from a big depression. It is quite peculiar that the *That's Incredible! Video Game Invitational* was held earlier the same year the "Great Video Game Crash" occurred – this especially noting how the crash of the industry affected direly even the arcades. As the timeline shows, the episode aired at February 21. 1983, whereas *New York Times* reported about the crash October 17. of the same year¹³. As the next tournament in *Incredible Sunday* aired at fall 1988 (Patterson 2017), the video games were rapidly making their comeback in North America. As the special episode was among the first ones to air in the show, it is likely that Alan Landsburg wanted to catch the attention of the younger audience right off the bat, therefore promoting the show itself.

The similarities between the episodes and sports broadcasting of the 1980's are not coincidental. According to Borowy & Jin (2013), as the competitive arcade gaming was on the rise in the 1980's, the arcade operators and media took a lot of influence from the world of sports (Borowy & Jin 2013, 2261). From the viewpoint of sports, the technology required to create an adequate audiovisual sports spectacle was not available until the 1970's (Whannel 2009, 208). This came through lighter and eventually cheaper camera-sets developed in those decades and the invention of mobile radio microphones (Dwyer 2019, 143). However, if we look

¹² Universal Pictures/Nintendo Movies 1989

¹³ Video Game Industry Goes Down To Earth. *New York Times* October 17. 1983.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/17/business/video-games-industry-comes-down-to-earth.html>

at Kellners' views of how a sports spectacle is strongly commercialized and nationalized, the early tournaments do not contribute to this as much as competitive gaming today. The spectacle of the tournaments do work as a marketing channel for the games, but because of the visual choices taken from the sports broadcasts, the performance rises above the commercialism. This is not the case with The Wizard though, as the product placement is also visually very evident. This, returning to Robert Gruneau¹⁴, is because in a live event the audience has to feel that they are at the location. The artistic choices made in movies and commercials does not need to tie to the audience in a same way.

It is unclear why official tournaments were absent from television in the 1990's. When it came to video games in television, play-by-phone –games, different magazine shows and game shows dominated the 1990's (Kerttula 2019). Most notable shows featuring competitive elements were *Famiko Daisakusen* (Japan 1986–1988), *Famiko Dai Shuugou* (Japan 1988-1990), *Games Master* (Great Britain 1992-1998), *Video and Arcade Top 10* (Canada 1991-2006) and *A*mazing* (Australia 1994-1998). Meanwhile video gaming competitions were still very much alive. Examples range from *Finnish National Computer Gaming Championships* 1994 & 1995 (Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018) to *Evolution Championship Series*, which began in 1996¹⁵. In comparison to the old live action representations, the 1990's shows promoted both the games and the performance. In the competitions, the games played were repeated episode after another and the prizes were games, consoles and other kinds of promotional video game – related stuff.

Competitive gaming started to appear in television only at late 1990's and early 2000's. In Finland, there was a brief show called *OverDose* (MoonTV 2002) and in The United States, *Arena* (G4tv, 2002-2006). *Arena* features many aspects that are present also in sports broadcasts. The interviews, staging, after-match talks and such are a big part of broadcasting style today in both electronic and traditional sports. The gameplay in *Arena* is presented very much as it was presented in the 1980's, but this time there are several players included in the imagery. However, this time around, the teams have names and the players' names are their online nicknames, rather than their real names. In addition, nationalism is now a big thing in competitive gaming. By looking at the best teams in Counter-Strike¹⁶ and Rocket League¹⁷, it is clear that the teams represent a country or a continent. In even smaller scale, some teams represent a city, which is obvious in for example the Finnish Esports League¹⁸. These days the cities or countries the teams represent are also a part of the spectacle. In Dreamhack Stockholm 2018, the local team, *Ninjas in Pyjamas*, were always announced to the stage in a spectacular fashion, where the announcer emphasized that the team was from Stockholm, or the "boys from our home city".

3 CONCLUSION

¹⁴ See p. 2

¹⁵ Fighting to Play: The History of Longest Lived Fighting Game Tournament in the World. Kotaku. <https://kotaku.com/fighting-to-play-the-history-of-the-longest-lived-figh-5054856>

¹⁶ <https://liquipedia.net/counterstrike/Portal:Teams>

¹⁷ <https://liquipedia.net/rocketleague/Portal:Teams>

¹⁸ <https://fel.gg/csgo/joukkueet/>

It is obvious that these shows played a notable role not only in the history of video game industry and marketing, but also in the early stages of video gaming culture and even competitive gaming. What really differentiates the shows from 1980's to 1990's and the contemporary shows is the focus of the spectacle. While before the video games were meant to be the spectacle and from the commercial point of view, usually the object being advertised, in modern days the spectacle has shifted the focus more on the performance. The commercialism revolves around the equipment. Asus, Acer, Razer and other big gaming-related accessory brands, sponsor the events. The players – or rather athletes – are part of the spectacle and promote these accessories through their performance. Through the spectacle, modern world of esports also promotes the lifestyle of the esports-athletes, in many ways alike the world of sports promotes the athletic lifestyle. This promotion comes through big paychecks and the idea of playing video games as an athletic profession. This was not the case in the early shows, as the whole concept of esports was still not developed. This is the reason why I am arguing that these shows originally tried to promote the games through the spectacle, but ended up promoting the performance of competitive play.

It is arguable whether these early shows affected the presentation of the modern eSports-broadcasts or not, but there is clear indication that sports broadcasting affected the presentation given in the shows. The form of the competition has changed towards modern days and the spectacle with the nationalism and commercialism being more and more a part of it has changed as well, but in the end, the players and the sport are the reason why the eSports-audience counts in millions today. It might have not been the initial case in the 1980's, but it surely became so once the competition began.

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