The Difference in Differentness: Low-Risk, High-Budget versus Innovation and Creativity

An exploratory view from a game-designer’s perspective

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Bachelor’s Essay | 15 credits
Medieteknik | HT2018/VT2018
Spelprogrammet
Skillnaden i olikhet: Lågrisk, Högbudget versus Innovation och Kreativitet

En utforskande vy från en speldesigners perspektiv
Abstract

With what seems like decades of debate behind us, low-risk, high-budget, high exposure releases are still seen as a threat to creativity, innovation and the health of the game industry as a whole. This exploratory pilot study aims to evaluate methods and create instruments which can be used to measure and compare the levels of differentness contained within the AAA and Indie releases. The case studies and surveys performed within this study are assessed as viable instruments for future, confirmatory studies, but with serious limitations outside of the chosen data sample.

Keywords: saturation, innovation, differentness, AAA, Indie, video game, industry, risk, creativity

Abstrakt

Med vad som verkar som årtionden av debatt bakom oss, spel som publiceras med lågrisk, hög-budget och hög exponering fortfarande betraktas som ett hot mot kreativitet, innovation och hälsan av hela spelindustrin. Denna utforskande pilotstudie syftar till att utvärdera metoder och skapa instrument som kan användas för att mäta och jämföra skillnadsnivån (olikhet) inom AAA och Indie spel. Fallstudier och enkäter som utfördes inom denna studie bedöms som genomförbara instrument för framtida, bekräftande studier, med allvarliga begränsningar utanför den valda datamängden.

Keywords: övermättnad, innovation, olikhet, AAA, Indie, TV-spel, industri, risk, kreativitet
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Introduction

The topic of differentness (dissimilarity, distinction, non-uniformity) in digital video games has been processed by many an author in and around the academic circles. It's a constant source of discussion and debate (Costikyan, 2005a, 2005b, 2014 Hagen, 2009, Brathwaite and Schreiber, 2009, Dymek, 2010, Carmel, 2010, Lipkin, 2012, etc.).

The game industry is often accused for not being original and inventive enough, making sequels and transmediations instead of creating new game concepts and genres. (Hagen, 2009)

Studies, conferences, presentations and articles show a great deal of interest, concern and even frustration regarding the game industry's tendency to (not) produce different, evolved or innovative games. The core focus (or rather, the main "culprit") seem to be the "AAA" game publishers. It has been hypothesized (and ranted about) for more than a decade that the most affluent and influential elements of the industry steer clear of risky, new, creative, fun game experiences.

Sequels to successful, moderately successful, and sometimes downright awful games are a staple of the game industry [...]. While players bemoan their very existence, saying that there’s no innovation or original mechanics in today’s video games, there’s a very good reason why publishers still order, ship, and sell sequels: because gamers buy them, no matter what they say. (Brathwaite and Schreiber, 2009, p.135)

This paper aims to shed some light on the topic and explore the possibility that this hypothetical trend has persisted in 2018, as well as establish some categories regarding "differentness” that can be discerned in modern titles, both of the incumbent and indie variety. The focus of the materials mentioned in this literature review, both academic and non-academic, is mostly on creativity and innovation, whereas this paper suggests, aims to process and establish a less extreme concept, differentness. If one was to consider an example of Katamari Damacy, Pirates!, Elite or Ultima as an innovative game (Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman, 2008), it would be unrealistic to expect this level and extent from new titles all the time. Ideally, a game designer probably strives to innovate whenever possible (and appropriate), but in between this eulogized ideal and its "stale" (Costikyan, 2005a) counterpart, there are almost infinite nuances.
Related Research

Game Industry, Marketing and Exposure — a Hypothesized Trend

A real-life phenomenon observed by many enables one to clarify a hypothesized trend that seems to exist in the game industry but was never a subject of a confirmatory study.

[...] in any given year, the majority of best-selling game titles are derived from pre-existing IP. [...] The preponderance of licensed IPs leads some to say innovation in games is dead. They reason that when using IP, it’s impossible to leave a mark all your own. Others find room for innovation even while using an IP. After all, when it comes to games, innovation isn’t found in the name, but rather in new game mechanics. (Brathwaite and Schreiber, 2009, p.121)

While Costikyan (2005b, p.4) states that (incumbent) “modern publishers’ increasing aversion to taking risks on innovative product is a troubling sign for the industry’s long-term health”, Ernkvist (2008, p.170) argues that decreased entrance barriers, “destructive liabilities of newness and smallness” are a contributing factor to industry crashes. These are not entirely contradictory, considering the long-term context of the former and short-term context of the latter, as well as the different layers of the industry being affected. Either way, what this study is interested in is the freedom to be creative, to take chances as a game designer, to innovate where plausible, with a quality player-experience in mind, not whether oligopoly will remain firmly in its seat, refusing to share a piece of the profits “cake”. Ernkvist and Costikyan ultimately agree that “decreasing possibilities to differentiate products in the market” (Ernkvist, 2008, p.166) is harmful for the industry’s health.

Video games as an entertainment form is characterized in particular by this constant urge for new variation in player experiences [...] (Ernkvist, 2008, p.164)

Dymek (2010, p.3) asks a question about the video game industry as a whole, which is pertinent to everything above and perhaps, below: “[...] will it become a truly universal massmedium, or will it continue down its subcultural path?” This author’s opinion is that, similar to the ninth art (comic strips), the game industry’s mean-value product (the average game release) will remain a subcultural
entertainment product, while its extremes, the shining innovative examples will remain, just as they always were, a true expression of an art-form, no matter how the public may view them overall. Whether, as Dymek puts it, as a “mass-cultural media of simulation” or in some other way, the true potential of the gaming industry, cultural and otherwise, can never be fully neutralized by its profit-driven mainstream nor the public’s perception, both of which proved to be a hard nut to crack throughout history. It is on us all to promote, expose and place our resources in the positive examples, regardless of the tendencies contained within the rest.

How is this relevant to this study? Dymek’s question pertains, among other things, to the tendencies of high-budget, high-exposure releases. The highest number of consumers is exposed to them, thus forming a mental image, standpoint, remembering the tendencies, learning that they are either fun and satisfying, possibly even culturally enriching experiences or soul-draining business endeavours that offer very little reward. Apart from the consumers, game designers, future and present-day ones, as well as the non-gamer remainder of the society are receiving a message: “This is what video games are in this day and age.” We are all taught of these (perceived) predominant tendencies through high-exposure games, even if there are incomparably more examples of the opposite, unwillingly “flying under the radar”.

Lipkin (2012) even argues that releasing an indie game is a way to protest against the mainstream, that the concept started out with indie releases "presenting anti-establishment perspectives by their mere existence" and that it should remain this way. Times are, however, changing and when it comes to production values, some of the more successful indie titles are more or less indistinguishable from AAA products nowadays.

On page 384, Dymek (2010) lists some core issues plaguing the video game industry, a straightforward depiction of the hypothesized trend:

[...] The immensely successful but selected few of stereotypical genres that generate the majority of industry revenues, the stratifying effects of radically increased developer budgets, the increasingly closed and internal nature of the video game industry, [...] the wave of industry consolidation which is not only horizontal but, also as of late, vertical creates highly concentrated power entities within the global industry, a never-ending plague of variety and innovation-stifling plagiarism [...]
Zackariasson and Dymek (2017, p.16) clearly differentiate between the “fun of making a game for oneself and not giving a toss about what anyone else thinks”, and a “marketing-focused process.” Employing a marketing-focused process while designing a game is definitely a sound recommendation, but is it realistic to expect that an indie game-designer will produce a ground-breaking masterpiece while also planning and executing the taxing, time-consuming marketing campaign on their own? Even though the digital distribution platforms have opened the door to independent, innovative projects, the findings of Broekhuizen, Lampel and Rietveld (2013, p. 955) point to incomparably better results (sales, financial gain, exposure) one can achieve through an alliance with the “power entities” (Dymek, 2010, p.384), by utilizing their complementary assets, due to the occurrence of “incumbent firms pre-emptively acquiring these assets, and then withholding availability to new entrants”.

[…] to seriously challenge the position of a dominant incumbent, a potential entrant must offer a substantial advantage to consumers generally. […] incumbent products or standards protected by significant network effects generally have been successfully challenged only by major innovations offering something the incumbent cannot match by cutting price. (Goltz, Franks and Goltz, 2015, p.8)

Radical/incompatible/disruptive innovation, as depicted by Goltz, Franks and Goltz (2015) and Ernkvist (2008) probably isn’t what Zackariasson and Dymek propose when they speak of a “marketing-focused process”. Designing for the game industry market seems to entail a more of an incremental, compatible type of innovation, depending on the perceived tendencies of the market, the expectations of the customer, consumer, gamer. Zackariasson and Dymek (2017) seem to propose a reconciliation between overly-innovative aspirations and trends discerned through market research.

Goltz, Franks and Goltz haven’t found a correlation between (the level of) innovation and user satisfaction, even though their sample is limited to two games. Moreover, the authors (Goltz, Franks and Goltz, 2015, p.13) state that “The innovation level was assessed by the authors on a scale of 1-10 in comparison to existing game maps”, while giving no particulars about the theoretical framework used in this “assessment”. This author finds the aforementioned practice and data
sample size insufficient to reach a noteworthy result and this too can be an interesting subject for future research.

Something which Zackariasson and Dymek (2017) also touch upon, Vardaxoglou and Baralou, (2012) and von Hippel (1986) process more thoroughly, sharing their findings on “open innovation through closed innovation”, lead users, user (player) experience and the opportunities that this fusion/integration between firms and consumers provides. Aoyama (2008), however, warns against the “blind faith in the involvement of users and user communities in innovation processes” especially because user communities can get unrealistic and biased in their standpoints and demands.

The problem of innovation-stifling oligopoly can possibly be countered through a combination of many aforementioned factors but neither of these are what this study is looking into. Even though the previously mentioned marketing-focused studies report the observed existence of the phenomenon, dissect the root causes and possibly even contain a solution (Design for the market? A “philanthropic” welfare/subsidy system for the “entrants”? Video game industry socialism? Open innovation involving lead users?), this particular study can currently gain no more from it than the listed perspectives, the reported existence of the phenomenon, dissection and a possibility of a solution. The authors mentioned above and below also provide a vocabulary which can be used to build scales, identify elements and codes as well as (the opposing) groups within the eventual data sample.

Due to the complexity of the hypothesized trend, the vagueness of the concepts and parameters involved, this study cannot aspire to offer a confirmatory result which allows for a verification of the hypothesis. Instead, it aims to explore the possibility of building a body of evidence regarding the presence/extent of differentness and the possibility of comparison of the two groups (types) of releases based on this extent.

**Elements of Differentness**

Many authors have attempted to “break” the digital video games into their basic components and some (e.g. Clearwater, 2011) have also remarked about the “artificiality” or even impossibility of this attempt. Nevertheless, these components, elements, however intertwined and potentially inextricable, can still be useful in building a body of evidence regarding the presence/extent of differentness contained
within various game releases. This entire chapter is to be viewed as a supplement to and a reference base for the Methods chapter, an extended, thorough substantiation of utilized methods. The elements and concepts listed are used within the study as prescribed and defined by the authors mentioned in this chapter.

A fairly comprehensive definition of game mechanics was given by Sicart (2008):

"[...] methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world [...]",
"[...] something that connects players' actions with the purpose of the game and its main challenges [...] within the space of possibility created by the rules."

Vahlo et al. (2017, p.92) have produced an extensive list of game dynamics, by analysing a total of 700 games, or more specifically, game reviews. A total of 33 game dynamics were identified, deduced from what appears to be a normative coding process. This study draws inspiration from their qualitative analysis/data sampling methods and utilizes their views on the game mechanic/dynamic correlation.

According to Costikyan (2005b), certain combinations of core game mechanics (resulting in game dynamics) can create new genres:

[...] in the space of all possible games, there are certain “peaks,” places where a fruitful combination of core mechanics combines to create engaging gameplay [...] “genre” has quite a different meaning for games than it does for fiction, or film; it is not based on theme (science fiction, noir, musical comedy), but on a gameplay dynamic [...] “the big win,” the greatest accomplishment a designer can hope to achieve is not to execute a game in an existing genre well (although there is no shame in that), but to envision a new genre, to find a new peak in the gameplay-space to support a novel style of play. (Costikyan, 2005b)

While Costikyan (2005b, p.3) argues that "one novel product establishes a new gameplay dynamic, that is, a collection of mechanics, or a genre – and many games shortly appear exploiting and slightly extending that genre", Apperley (2006, p.6) states that "clearly defined genre boundaries collapse to reveal structural similarities between the genres that exist within the current genre system, defined within the context of visual aesthetic or narrative structure".

While certain games appear to fit and belong within a well-defined genre, a vast number of emerging ones (which the author has discovered during the preparation for this study) cannot be placed in any existing “boxes” and would in fact require a novel genre for each and every new release. With this in mind, the concept of genre in
contemporary video games seems to have become as loose and flimsy as anything. Arsenault (2009) seems to mirror this author’s observations.

Genre appears to be an imprecise and intuitive concept; it is impervious to rigorous classification and systematization; it denotes potentially very different phenomena across media or disciplines; and it is a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon. [...] No amount of critical thinking can get us past these points to a grand, unified and stable genre categorization. (Arsenault, 2009, p.159)

This study utilizes the findings of those who previously processed the concept of genre in order to strengthen the theoretical sensitivity (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). It is in this paradigm between established and emerging genres that saturation (stereotypical, safe, stale genres) or differentness (evolution, innovation) can be discerned.

A novel approach by Ralph and Monu (2014, 2015) combines the very popular “MDA” framework of Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) and “The Elemental Tetrad” of Schell (2008). Another author (Gibson, 2015) refers to the aforementioned MDA and Tetrad frameworks as significant, while also including the “FDD” framework of Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman (2008). Furthermore, Brathwaite and Schreiber (2009) offer their own “Game Design Atoms” framework, which on top of the mechanics and dynamics, considers goals, game view/space, theme, also from the game designer perspective. These frameworks, cited as relevant by an overwhelming number of authors, reveal an aspect which is of great interest regarding the research purpose of this study — the game designer perspective and the identifiable elements which are at their disposal. Views of Järvinen (2002), regarding a division among audio-visual styles and senso-motoric elements are also relevant to this study and useful in increasing theoretical sensitivity and discerning saturation/rarity.

Why is the game designer perspective pertinent here? It has been amply demonstrated that many different authors, directly or indirectly, remark about the development process being stifled, limited and suffocated by the low-risk, high-exposure releases and publishers. That the designer, along with the artist and other members of the development team, is either forced to work within a dominant-incumbent firm which apparently won’t allow for any notable innovation at game-design level, or to challenge the incumbent firms as new entrants, against all odds. That the game designer plays the key role in envisioning, developing and, albeit
indirectly, creating the \textit{player experience}, however innovative or stereotypical it may be. Therefore, this study analyses the available materials in search of new and \textit{different} game-design elements, as well as the stale and stereotypical ones, aided by the aforementioned frameworks.

As Clearwater (2011) notes, both of the opposing viewpoints, “narratology” and “ludology” have posited valid and invalid claims during the years of “schism” and entrenched debate, hence neither of them appears to hold a valid position. When attempting to place a game into a genre category, and thus, also determine its \textit{similarity} or \textit{differentness} compared to other games published in the past, one cannot ignore its dynamics, narrative, sensory input (visuals, sound), theme, iconography, nor any other aspect of the \textit{player} (user) \textit{experience}. Genres appear to be fluid and subject to constant “evolution”, but as Arsenault (2009, p.159) states “current genre theory has abandoned the idea of genre evolution in its strongest, biological sense (‘things getting better’), and the only admission of the word nowadays is to describe ‘the changing of things through time’”. Again, the focus of this study, \textit{differentness}, appears to be strongly connected to the \textit{evolution of genres}. More specifically, if a game being studied shows no signs of evolving an existing or creating a novel genre, it is most likely replicating a safe, stereotypical formula.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate (embedded and emergent) narrative and game mechanics (and consequently, dynamics) from audio-visuals and technology itself. With advanced game engines and 3D physics available, particles, invisible colliders, where does one draw a line between sensory input (visuals, sound) and mechanics? For example, if a collider is made smaller than the visual object, one which is blurred by partial transparency, post-processing and particles, made to adhere to custom gravitation and countless ways of behaviour (rules) we can ascribe to collisions, if sound is used to convey important information to the player, if the controller vibrations convey information and affect gameplay then it appears that technology, visuals and mechanics (and even other elements) form a smooth blend rather than being separate concepts with definable boundaries. This study treats them as such — an \textit{amalgamation} of elements which cannot be rated separately in every possible instance of what falls under the definition of a video game. Järvinen’s (2002) observations mirror this, while connecting them to the \textit{abstract} audio-visual style in the case of the example described above.
In context with the observed *amalgamate* property of game elements in modern releases, the *game mechanic-game dynamic parallel* can be viewed as a building block or a cohesive element between all of the other elements listed. In an overwhelming majority of cases, this parallel seems to bind everything else together in the game designers attempt to produce a *player experience*.

So, what is it that makes a game different than others or similar to others? Game mechanics, rules, audio-visuals, narratives, genre or even some other elements that affect the player experience? While browsing the vast oceans of new (and innovative) titles, one would probably conclude that it is in fact all of these put together, in greatly varying amounts and ratios from one game to the next. Hence, in the case study phase the focus is placed on the *newness* and *differentness* of the overall player experience.

I am not arguing that narrative, setting, or representational elements (iconography, if we want to reduce it to that) are more important than gameplay. In fact, I reject their complete separation. Isolating gameplay from anything else is useful from an analytical standpoint — that is, to break down a game to its component parts in order to better understand the whole — but we have to remember that it is artificial to do so. Even from the brief examples above, it is evident that the gameplay and other elements (setting, story, characters, theme, tone, etc.) are tethered to form the larger experience of each game. (Clearwater, 2011, p.33)

> [... ] genre of a game is tied not to an isolated, abstracted checklist of features, but to the phenomenological, pragmatic deployment of actions through the gameplay experience. Arsenault (2009, p.171)

Since it is becoming increasingly apparent that the player (user) experience is crucial in this instance, as the end result of all the aforementioned elements, a few words on *player experience* and what it means to the following study:

The game designer envisions how a game will work during play. She creates the objectives, rules, and procedures, thinks up the dramatic premise and gives it life, and is responsible for planning everything necessary to create a compelling player experience. (Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman, 2008, p.2)

Learning how to set interesting and engaging player experience goals means getting inside the heads of the players, not focusing on the features of the game as you intend to design it. (Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman, 2008, p.11)
Game designers create experience, but only indirectly. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.168)

Through the quotes of the aforementioned, one can probably deduce that the narrative, art and sensory input (story, visuals, audio) affect the player experience as well, apart from the game mechanics and game dynamics. Therefore, differentness can be measured only in relation to the player experience as the sum, end product of it all. In other words, different (and unique) player experiences can be viewed as the sole prerequisite of differentness (and innovation) in games.

Wiemeyer et al. (2016) have made an attempt to summarise previous work regarding the player experience phenomena. Their findings make it clear that it is impossible to utilize the prescribed measuring methods within this particular study. Not only would this require a large number of participants playing a large number of games (in this case, 52), these participants would need to be experts with an extensive experience of gaming throughout the sizable history of digital video games — those who witnessed and experienced a significant portion of said history, since its “explosion” in the late 70s and early 80s, up until today. It can be argued from a historical perspective that only these, “expert” player participants would have the experience and knowledge required to compare the differentness contained within the tested releases to the rest of the games they played throughout their lives. This kind of endeavour is left to eventual future studies, while remarking that it’s not necessarily the ideal approach anyhow. Several decades from now, such players might not exist anymore and the human lifespan will probably not suffice to sustain this type of research participant. However, the player experience is undoubtedly a crucial piece of the puzzle in this instance.

With limited resources (time, manpower) and in the interest of thoroughness, this study instead processes, reflects upon and utilizes the parts relevant to the research question from the theoretical frameworks mentioned in this sub-chapter, employing a fusion of both perspectives, that of the game designer and the player. This study derives the player experience from an ample amount of game reviews, utilizing Archival Inquiry (Sköld et al., 2015).

Speaking of genres, Costikyan (2005a) identifies the extremes, the “stale” which recycle an existing, saturated (“stereotypical”, (Dymek, 2010)) genre while taking no risks, bringing no differentness, and the “greatest achievement” of a game designer,
envisioning of a new genre and creating an innovative game (Costikyan 2005b).

Arsenault (2009) identifies differentness as an indicator of evolution within a specific genre. A summary of these views and findings is conducted, resulting in a scale of categories, beginning with the stale, saturated, stereotypical, safe (S) on one end, ending in genre-generating, innovative (I) on the other. In between, Arsenault’s and Costikyan’s evolved (E) and neutral (N) releases, which are either providing some differentness within an established genre, bringing new features or different takes on the old ones (E), exploiting and slightly extending a genre or executing a game in an existing genre, neither evolving nor innovating significantly, but not blatantly plagiarizing either (N).

These categories are applied through a case study of game-elements and player experiences revealed within the data sample. On top of the four main categories (S, N, E, I), three intermediates are added in the interest of accuracy (S/N, N/E, E/I), whenever a researcher or a survey participant is uncertain where to place a particular release or game element. They can also be referred to by their numerical value on the 7-point Likert-scale. Once an ample body of evidence is built, a quantitative comparison between groups can be conducted.

The division between open and closed innovation given by Lichtenthaler (2011) and Vardaxoglou and Baralou (2012) and a clarification regarding their boundaries is utilized in relation to the research question. More specifically, this study is interested in high-budget (“AAA”) projects based on closed (“in-house”) and open (outsourced) innovation, not on the belated acquisition of already developed, tested and popularised ideas. More on this in the “Discussion” chapter of this paper.

Since this study isn’t attempting to unify the vocabulary (like Ralph and Monu did in 2014 and 2015), game elements derived from the listed theoretical frameworks are viewed through a simplified, practical lens related to the research purpose in this instance. Considering the limited resources and optimal pathways to relevant findings within the data sample, the chosen overarching method is Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, pp.101-116, Fram, 2013), which fits the explorative nature of this study, as stated by Stebbins (2008) in Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods, describing the Exploratory Data Analysis in conjunction with the Constant Comparative method (CCA). As remarked by Fram (2013), CCA doesn’t always result in Grounded Theory, nor is it necessary.
Since the study uses predetermined concepts and theories derived from game design elements, as Charmaz (2006) states, on page 3, that “initial codes […] and our ideas about them point to areas to explore during subsequent data collection”, this is exactly what this study intends to execute. Depending on the results, the game elements are constantly updated and focus shifts to concepts which yield more relevant results. As Fram (2013) explains, both a “theoretical sensitivity” is developed and an “organizing and reducing of data” takes place. Questions are revised, rewritten, some may be removed or added before the next release is processed. While certain elements remain active in the study (in spite of producing no results), they can be skipped based on heuristics and saturation, then considered again if a game release appears like it can reveal something new.

By utilizing Case Studies, Archival Inquiry and Constant Comparative Analysis, this study is looking for differentness both within the individual components (sensory input, narrative, dynamics) and their sum (genre, player experience). The very nature of the qualitative analysis process allows for new interesting findings in addition to the predetermined elements. The approach is mostly deductive, as the hypothesized trend has been discerned and the core elements of games are used to construct relevant questions. Still, the Constant Comparative Analysis method allows for some induction, correction and optimization based on findings.

Is the Hypothesized Trend demonstrable?

The literature processed above has helped this study better understand the problem and consequently, formulate a better statement of purpose. If one were to analyse the vocabulary of the authors within the previously quoted literature which remarks about the problem, the negative factors can be isolated: “aversion to taking risks”, “stale” (Costikyan, 2005b and 2005a), “sequels” (Hagen, 2009), “stereotypical genres”, “variety and innovation-stifling plagiarism”, “stratifying effects of radically increased developer budgets”, “highly concentrated power entities” (Dymek, 2010), “innovation in games is dead”, “preponderance of licensed IPs”, “best-selling game titles” (Brathwaite and Schreiber, 2009), “withholding […] of complementary assets” (Broekhuizen, Lampel and Rietveld, 2013), “dominant incumbent” (Goltz, Franks and Goltz, 2015).

An attempt to consolidate a statement regarding the hypothesized, negative trend and an aggregate position regarding its significance and the benefits of its reversal:

Dominant incumbent firms predominantly release stale, stereotypical sequels which end up as best-selling games due to their development/advertising budgets, while also restricting the availability of complementary assets to new entrants in the market.

The game industry’s long-term health depends on original, fruitful combinations of game mechanics, which create new dynamics, player experiences and new genres, variety and innovation which are currently present to a greater degree among the aforementioned new entrants, also known as independent (indie) publishers.

Seeing how there is a plethora of studies and other materials claiming a connection between low-risk, low-differentness and high-budget, high-exposure releases within the video game industry, this study aims to strengthen the body of evidence regarding this problematic, hypothetical tendency/trend. By performing case studies, utilizing Constant Comparative Analysis through Archival Inquiry, building surveys which allow for a subsequent triangulation/quantitative comparison, it attempts to explore the concept of a significant difference in differentness between the contemporary “AAA” (best-selling) and “Indie” (new entrant) game titles. This is not, by any means, a study which aims to confirm and determine the extent of difference in differentness between the groups, merely an emulation of it (a.k.a. pilot), with a purpose of checking where the gaps and caveats may be and finding additional questions which might be difficult/impossible to answer using this particular methodology. During the analysis, the author is also looking for ways to close the gaps and develop useful tools for this task. By doing this, it is assessed, the body of evidence can be further enlarged and fortified through subsequent research. In a way,
it is a pilot study concerned with research design which would fit the given hypothesis and enable a subsequent confirmatory study.

Since one cannot view innovation as an on/off switch, true/false (present/absent) state of a variable, nor has there ever been a consensus on the definition of innovation regarding video games, the concept of differentness is suggested and introduced. If one cannot objectively determine the extent of innovation, this study aims to discern whether a game contains elements which are different from previous releases.

Figure 1 shows the related research in the form of a literature map, as well as the question this study is trying to explore (a gap it is trying to fill): “Is there a demonstrable connection?” regarding the previously clarified research question / statement of purpose.

Figure 1: A Literature Map of related research, based on Creswell (2014, p.36)
Research question / purpose

The purpose of this exploratory pilot study is to evaluate methods and develop instruments which can potentially test the hypothesis of a significant difference between the contemporary “AAA” (best selling) and “Indie” (new entrant) video games regarding the level of differentness (dissimilarity, distinction, non-uniformity), as compared to older releases. This study is testing the viability, feasibility of a subsequent confirmatory study.

The question, which this study isn’t trying to answer, as it is left to an eventual confirmatory study, is: “Does a significant difference exist between contemporary “AAA” (best selling) and “Indie” (new entrant) video games regarding the level of differentness (dissimilarity, distinction, non-uniformity), as compared to older releases?”
Methods

The study utilizes the Exploratory Concurrent Mixed Method (Creswell, 2009, Creswell, 2014), by gathering and analysing qualitative data through a multiple case study process, while utilizing the findings of qualitative analysis to build surveys. After organizing and reducing the data, survey instruments are constructed according to need, related to the deficiencies derived from the case study process. Surveys, in turn, allow for completion of case studies and an independent quantitative analysis phase, as well as triangulation. The overall approach to the study employs Constant Comparative Analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, pp.101-116), while taking a more deductive path which doesn’t necessarily revolve around grounded theory (Fram, 2013). The Related Research section of this study, (“Elements of Differentness” in particular) can be viewed as developing Glaser’s theoretical sensitivity (Fram, 2013), while building a “checklist” of concepts which are to be examined through case studies, surveys, subsequent quantitative analysis and triangulation.

Data Gathering

The data sample consists of 52 releases (games) taken from the same source, “Top Sellers Of 2018 So Far” (Steam, 2018), divided into two groups based on the tags given by the Steam platform. For a full list of titles, check Appendix 3.

Each group consists of 26 releases, starting at the top based on ranking (Platinum, Gold, Silver, Bronze). The tags which separate indie releases from non-indie releases, allow for a division between groups, 26 being the total number of indie releases contained within the source (Steam, 2018). Some randomization was provided by the Steam platform (each time the page is reloaded, the titles show up in a different order within their sales-ranking group). This convenience-sampling method was chosen for several reasons. Primarily because it would otherwise be very hard (borderline impossible) to locate and separate Indie and “AAA” titles in order to form two groups of equal size. Another reason is high exposure in both groups, which provides both ample material for analysis and, as it was revealed during the case study phase, completion of Survey 2, which relies on exposure in order to gather a sufficient amount of data from anonymous participants online.
Case Studies

According to Mills (2008, pp.100-101), Comparative Analysis within case study research is a common choice when aiming to highlight differences between a particular case and a frame of reference. Analysing the checklist of game elements provided by the authors mentioned in “Elements of Differentness” chapter resulted in the following questions which are to be answered during the case studies. The elements were tested and assessed within the case study process, then filtered, leaving those that can lead to evidence of differentness, or lack thereof. In order to answer the questions, for each separate title a variety of materials was analyzed for evidence of similarity or differentness, including but not limited to: reviews, cultural essays, development records, game analysis, similar-game lists, promo materials, video recordings and walkthroughs. Utilizing the Constant Comparative method, new questions are discovered, considered and added during the study and reflection process, in relation to the discerned gaps in evidence. Each of these questions has one underlying purpose — to discern whether the player experience is new and different as compared to older games. The questions are constantly revised, optimized, merged and rephrased, in order to produce a solid framework which would eventually enable confirmatory results. The “lenses” referenced below are theoretical frameworks which set the boundaries for and define particular game elements and properties. This term is not to be confused with Schell’s (2008) “lenses”.

- **Origin**: What is the origin of the game and its idea? Was it developed in-house, outsourced or acquired from an independent creator after it was released? Is the game a “revival” or a modification of an older, underexposed idea? Lens: Hagen (2009), Lichtenthaler (2011), Vardaxoglou and Baralou (2012).

- **Narrative and goals**: Are they delivered (by the developers) and created (by the players) in a new and different, unique way? Embedded, emergent, (non)linear, branching, or something else? Utilize Survey 1 results. Lens: Ralph and Monu (2014, 2015), Clearwater (2011).
• **Sensory input:** Does the game utilize a unique use of visuals, sound or other kinds of sensory input? Lens: Ralph and Monu (2014, 2015), Järvinen (2002).

• **Dynamics and genre:** Are the game mechanics new and unique? Do they create a unique combination, resulting in a new and different game dynamic?

• How much time (which ratio of time) is spent on a certain game dynamic during a walkthrough? Compare to Survey 1 results.

• Can the genre be easily discerned or does the game (aspire to) create a new one? By analysing Steam tags, discern whether they classify the game well or would additional tags be necessary. Among similar games (e.g. Steam, 2018b) check how homogenous the games appear to be. Lens: Sicart (2008), Vahlo et al. (2017), Costikyan (2005b), Apperley (2006), Ralph and Monu (2015), Clearwater (2011).

• **Player experience:** Is the experience, the total sum of other elements, as projected and envisioned by the game designer and experienced by the player, different and new? How is differentness of a particular release addressed by professional reviewers? Perform a qualitative analysis of an ample number of game reviews. Provide a summary.


**Surveys**

Two online surveys were conducted, the first one as a supplement to Case Studies, the second as an independent instrument of confirmation (using Welch’s (1947) t-test) and a tool which can be used in triangulation. Survey 1 inquires about “stale” genres, dynamics and narratives, whereas Survey 2 lists the 52 titles from the data sample, with a question directed at differentness and a 7-point Likert-type scale (Fetterman, 2008). While they both stem from gaps and deficiencies discovered during the case study phase, they also supplement the case study by providing focus for certain questions (stereotypical genres, dynamics, narratives, overall ratings) and allowing for triangulation.
In this exploratory pilot study, the number of participants that the author managed to enlist using the online forums and groups (Facebook (Zuckerberg, 2004), Reddit (Huffman and Ohanian, 2005)) is 81 for Survey 1 and 91 for Survey 2. There is a certain degree of coverage error (not all Steam users have had a chance of participating).

For Survey 2, a sample size can be calculated due to its quantitative nature. If one assumes the total of world gamer population is 2.4 billion (Ukie, 2018, Newzoo, 2018) or considers the total number of registered Steam users as 125 million (Arceta, 2018) and applies the Cochran Sample Size formula to either of the two populations (Cochran, 1977, Bartlett and Ik, 2001, p.46), at 3% margin of error and 95% confidence level (0.05 alpha level), standard deviation of 1.167 (for a 7-point Likert scale), they would end up with a 118 projection of minimum recommended sample size (n). For Survey 1, due to its qualitative nature, recommendations of Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994) vary between 20 and 50 participants, both of which were exceeded by this study.

This would be a scenario where each participant provides a valid, punctual, thorough report of their player experience for each question answered within Survey 1 and an equivalent quality of 7-point Likert Scale ratings in Survey 2.
Results

Case Studies

Starting from the top (“Platinum” category in Steam’s Top Selling games of 2018), a game from each of the two groups is analysed through case studies (Gerring, 2007), as shown in the examples below. The case study firstly employs archival inquiry (Sköld et al., 2015) to locate and compare game elements. The results of a thorough analysis are then supplemented by game reviews, which hold more weight as they convey a multitude of player experiences. After each processed game release, the findings are reflected upon, questions and codes are revised and updated. The results of reflection and revision are first applied back onto the case study which produced them, as well as the analysis of each following release in the data sample, as prescribed in the Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). Instruments (in this case, surveys) are devised and tested in order to fill the perceived gaps. The initial checklist of game-design elements is refined and optimized through the case study, leaving those which yield relevant results. The Reflection/Discussion section of this paper can also be seen as a result of this study, because it contains important observations obtained through the aforementioned process.

The examples below are given in order to depict the process. A total of three more titles was processed in a similar fashion and the findings were recorded, though not displayed in detail within this paper. Even though they are listed in a separate chapter, most of the reflections can also be viewed as results because they depict the concurrent nature of the study, the sequence of finding and addressing deficiencies, thus showing the purpose/efficiency of the case study phase, as well as elaborating on the viability/usefulness of methods and instruments overall.

It is important to note the aggregate-subjectivity nature of results regarding the qualitative coding of reviews en masse, which is the final step of the case study process. Apart from the possibility of collective hype, plagiarism (slightly altered reviews copied from others), there is many a speculation and even some well substantiated reports regarding the occurrence of game publishers deliberately
creating bias among reviewers, with mention of Metacritic scores in particular (Usher, 2012, Under the Influence: Microsoft paying for positivity on Youtube, 2014, Moon, 2016). Thus, even though the number of reviews processed is fairly high and should in theory result in an objective summary, the statements derived from reviews need to be taken with some reserve, especially when it comes to popular releases.

**Far Cry 5**

**Origin of the game/idea:** The franchise started as an FPS release from another firm, Crytek and was later acquired by its current owner, Ubisoft (Far Cry, 2019). Seeing as the FPS genre wasn’t created by Far Cry, this instance cannot be viewed as purchasing ready-made innovation from an Indie developer, which Crytek arguably wasn’t either way, back in 2004. Since the initial release, the franchise gradually evolved the concept, steering away from FPS and expanding it.

**Narrative:** The central goal appears to be defeating and destroying a religious cult. In a way, the player is expected to *wage war* on them, conquer territories together with their NPC companions, whether they choose to enlist them, or they are imposed upon the player by the embedded narrative. The element of religious extremism in games isn't new (Top 10 Video Game Cults, 2016), and neither is the combination of realistic, contemporary setting and central focus, as there are even games which promote various religions (Religion and video games, 2018).

Nonlinear, branching story with multiple endings isn’t a novel concept (List of video games with multiple endings, 2018, Far Cry 5 All Endings, 2018). Both emergent and embedded narrative are present, with over 2 hours of cutscenes with subtitles (FAR CRY 5 All Cutscenes Movie, 2018).

Social/political commentary isn't a new feature (MacDonald, 2015, Robertson, 2017, Bogost, 2008, p.130). An example of its socio-political message is the warning against religious extremism and the loopholes that sects and cults utilize to pass themselves off as a legal entity that even enjoys some level of privilege and protection. It can be argued that the game shows some differentness here. A cultural essay (Robertson, 2018) notes that the political commentary isn't particularly relevant and that it "takes a backseat to firefights and explosions". The overall consensus
derived from many similar sources seems to be that the game isn't doing anything substantial with the political commentary in its story, merely trying to be entertaining and profitable. Still, it is present, and therefore the narrative cannot be assessed as “stale”.

It doesn't appear that the industry is too saturated with this particular story element, but in order to generate a body of evidence, an online survey was concurrently conducted (see section “Survey 1”), not only in connection to story but to record the public opinion regarding stale elements and genres in games overall. The survey didn’t reveal this particular narrative as stale, even if there is a neighbouring storyline that the public seems “fed up with” (e.g., the “20th/21st century war” story, also pertaining to the visuals of modern automatic weapons being present on the screen for most of the playthrough), as well as other elements (dynamics, genre) strongly pointing to the core dynamics as stereotypical (shooting/FPS). If one would judge Far Cry by narrative elements alone, it appears it would fall into the neutral (N) category.

**Visuals and Sound (Sensory Input):** Visuals are realistic and very high-end but nothing that hasn't been done before (Dingman, 2018, Jumbla, 2017). The art style doesn’t appear to be unorthodox as it is an attempt at realism. According to Järvinen (2002), this is a very frequent choice. There is an extensive amount of voice acting and realistic environment sound but this is not especially new either (IMDB, 2013). It can be argued that the sensory-input elements lean towards the intermediate (N/E) category.

**Dynamics:** Using the game guide (Halas, 2018) and a walkthrough video recording (Far Cry 5 FULL Walkthrough No Commentary, 2018), dynamics were thoroughly studied. Most of the time in the walkthrough is spent on travelling/exploring, cut-scenes/interaction and combat/FPS. They are often interwoven. In conjunction with the results of the first survey, this puts the game dynamics in the “stale” category. The power fantasy design choice (which pertains to game mechanics/difficulty) hinders the potential of a detailed, thorough realism, and with it, the potential for differentness. Character creation, inventory, navigation, weapons reveal nothing new. Modes of character transportation are numerous, but this is not new nor unique. The driving dynamic is, needless to say, not new, but one might consider the flying dynamic and emergent "dogfights" with other planes less
common, and a "game within a game" as there are other games built entirely around this dynamic.

Co-op mode doesn't bring anything especially new (Birnbaum, 2018). On top of this it is hindered by disabling the “guest” player from story progress and both players from obtaining trophies and achievements (Saed, 2017, Tucker, 2018) so it can be assessed as a sketchy, superficial feature which other games have done in a more functional, complete, extensive way. Furthermore, a vast number of games base their entire gameplay on massively-multiplayer concepts where co-op is the default mode of operation.

NPC teammates and animal companions are neither unique nor "stale" features. If one considers their abilities, no matter how large a role they play in actual gameplay (how often the player actually uses them), they still add a lot of complexity and (potential) differentness (Parkin and Tach, 2018). Arguably a different, but equally complex and more narrative-relevant, still somewhat similar examples can be found in older releases such as Fallout 4 (Companions - Fallout 4 Wiki Guide - IGN, 2016) and Shadow of Mordor (Strengths and Weaknesses - Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor Wiki Guide - IGN, 2016), and undoubtedly others before that. Combined with the extensive list of player-character "perks" (skills, talents), this increases the complexity and differentness (Frushtick and Tach, 2018). Far Cry series introduced the skill-tree since Far Cry 3 which was released in 2012, so this feature isn’t noteworthy by itself, only as a combination with NPC abilities. This dynamic can be likened to leading an RPG party of characters, but it is apparent that the particulars of Far Cry 5 provide a degree of evolution/differentness, even if the average player doesn’t focus on it nor utilize it to a great extent.

Though it’s not a pay-to-win game, Far Cry 5 does have quite a few monetization elements built into it (Parsons, 2018). According to Survey 1, they are perceived as saturated, too frequently used features. Repetitive “grinding” elements don’t seem to be present either (How bad is the grind?, 2018).

The hunting dynamic (Parkin, 2018) is about earning in-game currency, not about a survival dynamic. It isn't as detailed nor extensive as dedicated hunting simulations — e.g. theHunter: Classic with 44 unique species in April of 2018, prior to release of Far Cry 5 (Animals | The Hunter Wikia, 2018), but within Far Cry 5 it can be viewed as another "game within a game" which is arguably far from a stereotypical feature.
Fishing is not a frequent feature either and though it doesn’t seem to offer the realism and complexity of dedicated fishing games, it does place this potentially tranquil activity into a frantic FPS/combat setting, a dynamic which can be found in quite a few releases (PC Gamer, 2018) but done differently, within different genres of games.

Emergent gameplay seems to produce quite a few unorthodox moments overall (CHEESEBURGER THE BEAR (Far Cry 5 Funny Moments), 2018), though the same can be said for many games of this type of genre and this level of production. Animals and NPCs attacking each other — not a stale feature but it has been done before, e.g. Shadow of Mordor (Monolith Productions, 2014), The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), just to name a few. Animals copulating with each other — a quasi-emergent dynamic that can be likened to an interactive cut scene for comedic purposes. The crafting system has not evolved nor expanded, according to Fekete (2018): "Crafting in Far Cry 5 is much simpler than previous entries in the franchise, and the number of craftable items have been dramatically reduced".

The sheer scope and variety of mutually connected dynamics counters the staleness of the core concept. Stale, neutral and evolved dynamics are present.

**Genre:** According to Arsenault (2009, p.157), the concept of genre is more a tool of communication than strict classification. Its literal meaning in the context of digital video games can be interpreted as “type”, “kind of game”, therefore the tags derived from the Steam platform can be viewed as a good indicator of genre, especially if one factors in the high exposure of games in the data sample.

Tags: Open World, Action, FPS, Co-op, Multiplayer, Adventure, Shooter, First-Person, Singleplayer, America, Survival, Stealth, Story Rich, Hunting, Exploration, Atmospheric, Character Customization, Sexual Content, Great Soundtrack, Nudity. (Far Cry® 5 on Steam, 2018)

It is apparent from the previous sections as well as Steam tags that Far Cry 5 isn’t inventing a new genre, but rather slowly moving away from its core FPS concept towards the more versatile “Action Adventure” genre. Quite a few of the dynamics are similar to GTA games, sequels 3,4 and 5 in particular (Rockstar Games, 2019), even the interactive-movie style of delivering/creating the narrative. According to Survey 1 results, the FPS as a genre and a core dynamic, in contrast to most of its
features, move Far Cry 5 much closer to the "stale" category of releases. A brief look at the gameplay of releases in the similar games lists (LyncConf, 2018, Twinfinite, 2018) seems to reveal quite a bit of the more unorthodox gameplay than Far Cry 5 has to offer, predominantly coming from older games.

**Player Experience / Summary:** References to newness/differentness derived from a review-aggregate website Metacritic (Far Cry 5, 2018):

"does not come with any groundbreaking innovations […] big step forward nonetheless" "very much the same game we’ve played before", "Ubisoft […] went back to what they know works for certain, they played it safe from a gameplay perspective while adding just enough to call it new and improved" "another "safe" title from Ubisoft […] the experience is dangerously similar to his predecessors." “some compelling and truly innovative approaches from Ubisoft” “amazing experience […] not the game we expected” "If you're not bothered by the slightly repetitive formula, you'll enjoy the many strengths of this episode." “surely isn’t something that will be remembered for long” "It’s not as memorable or unique as some of its predecessors, but incredibly detailed open world makes Hope County a destination worth visiting." "Far Cry 5 isn't the great departure we might've hoped for, with both gameplay and story playing it very safe"

It appears that whenever the differentness aspect is addressed by the reviewers, the game is *mostly* placed in the stale, safe, stereotypical category, whereas the remainder of the case study hints that it’s stale in its core features, but otherwise predominantly neutral, seldom evolved.

![Figure 2. Survey 2 results for Far Cry 5, with the average rating of 2.675](image)

The graph (Figure 2) represents the ratings of participants, starting from the lowest rating, on the left, with a count of 12 votes, to the highest rating on the right. A rounded up average rating (2.675) amounts to 3, which represents the neutral category. The ratings of participants of the second survey, place Far Cry 5 in (and
even slightly below) the neutral category, which is consistent with the case study results – this is where it appears to belong, having done very little to infuse the game industry with a new and different player experience.

**Rocket League**

**Origin of the game/idea:** *Rocket League* (Psyonix, 2015) is a direct, evolved sequel to the *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars* (Psyonix, 2008) title (SARPBC), developed and published by the same company. The default mode is "basically the same game" with predominantly technical improvements (Double Double, 2015). The original idea, quite innovative to begin with, received much more exposure with the sequel and with it, the deserved acclaim. It can be argued that only after the release and success of *Rocket League* the genre was truly established and created (Costikyan's (2005b) "fruitful" qualifier). It can also be viewed as an extension of the innovative franchise, a second, successful attempt at delivering the much-needed differentness to the player base and the game industry as a whole.

**Narrative/Theme:** Embedded narrative seems to be nonexistent (Messner, 2017) which lets the players "conjure" it up through imagination alone and create it via gameplay. There's nothing new about either of these properties as some of the earliest popular games (e.g. *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980)) share them.

**Visuals/Sound (Sensory Input):** Even though they are possibly improved over SARPBC, neither of the two offer something new, when measured against the rest of the gaming history (Category:Futuristic racing games, 2013).

**Mechanics/Dynamics:** Sommersaults, power-slides, barrel-rolls, bicycle kicks, booster-powered manoeuvres provide the player with a multitude of ways to move and rotate their cars, whether on the ground or in the air. The difference in skill level between beginners and experienced players is significant which suggests that the complex dynamics are unique to the game (Elite Car Control Tutorial (PC ONLY) | Rocket League, 2017, How I became a Freestyler overnight, 2018, Rocket League Tutorial: Air Roll Shots, 2017). Surely, most of these mechanics have existed in previous games in one way or another, and examples of this can be located, but it is
the combination, application and dynamics of SARPBC, and consequently Rocket League, that make them unique. Apart from default mode, there are several secondary modes which expand the mechanics/dynamics significantly.

**Genre:** Instances of vehicular Soccer or "car soccer" in the past can be seen in the referenced videos: *Car Polo* from 1977 (Game of the day 1006 Car Polo (カーポロ) 1977 Exidy, 2014), 1994 *Street Racer* (Street Racer (SNES) Soccer, 2010), 2002’s *Road Trip Adventure* (Road Trip Adventure: Car football!, 2015) and the previously mentioned *SARPBC* from 2008 (Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars Gameplay Trailer, 2010).

Even though three games of the obscure, underdeveloped original genre can be located before SARPBC, it can be argued that only with the technology available in 2015, Rocket League has managed to truly establish this genre (and even expand it to "vehicular basketball" and other modes) and give it the popularity it obviously deserves (92% positive rating on Steam, out of 182129 ratings on 03.Jan.2018).


Tags: Multiplayer, Racing, Soccer, Sports, Competitive, Team-Based, Online Co-Op, Football, Action, Co-op, Fast-Paced, Local Multiplayer, Great Soundtrack, Funny, Split Screen, Local Co-Op, Singleplayer, 4 Player Local, Casual, Indie (Rocket League® on Steam, 2015)

Tags provided by the Steam platform don’t convey the actual genre of the game, which is a good indicator of newness and differentness revealed by the genre, seeing as the more commonplace (and saturated) a genre is, the more established it gets within the vocabulary, which is the case with the previous case study, but not this one.

Rocket League almost defies the concept of genre, making it seem comical and futile to attempt and categorize all of its game modes. Furthermore, games similar to Rocket League (Steam, 2018b) reveal a plethora of modified-soccer titles, with all-new dynamics and a multitude of ways, objects and agents which help the player get the ball into a goal (or keep it out of one). All of this makes it hard to tell whether a
new genre has been created by these mechanics, as suggested by Costikyan (2005b) or is it an overwhelming multitude of "genres" sprawling out from one another like tree branches, one being more innovative than the next.

**Player Experience:** A compilation of relevant quotes from reviews obtained via Metacritic website (Rocket League, 2015):

"turns an amazing and simple concept into a well executed game" "a multiplayer heavyweight" "squeezing every last drop of fun out of a simple concept" "extra layer of polish on an idea that was already refined" "if developer support continues, Rocket League could turn into something truly special" "executes a simple idea beautifully, with nuanced controls lending themselves to both skillful displays and screwball comedy" "well thought-out and well designed game [...] unique atmosphere of a great sporting event [...] simple but effective ideas." "Most sports would probably be better if human participants were replaced with cars" "A fresh new take on football [...] a fast and fun diversion as well as a deep and complex multiplayer experience [...]" "Is that football? No! Is that car race? No! Rocket League is a different type." "very original and finessed multiplayer arcade game that revolves around football with cars" "example where the execution of a simple, absurd idea is so strong and so engaging that it doesn’t need a ton of extra features around it" "[...] core gameplay loop feel like no driving game ever made before it" "a near-perfect example of game design; an invented sport that understands how to create feelings of triumph and tension [...] rare enough for me to recommend the game strongly"

The context and frequency of reviewers mentioning "concept" and "idea" suggests that a significant level of differentness is perceived. Some state that it's an invented sport, a rare example, fresh, new, different, original, different, absurd idea. Even though a total of four instances exists within the genre prior to this release, three of them being a very different game and one being an underexposed prequel in the same franchise (the "original" release), Rocket League can still be credited with popularizing an underexposed, budding genre and thus, contributing *differentness* to the game industry, not to mention its expansion into other game modes/genres.
Figure 3 shows the results of Survey 2 for Rocket League, with the lowest rating (S,1) on the left and the highest one (I, 7) on the right. As the case study of individual elements and coding of review material both reveal an innovative title, the results of survey 2 place it in the evolved/innovative intermediate category. It is important to note that no other game in the data sample scored higher than Rocket League (5.538) and considering that some participants didn’t quite understand the instructions, the score would be even higher, had it not been diluted by a few random ratings. With these two factors in mind, the result of triangulation can be seen as consistent and the release as innovative.

Survey 1 — Saturation within Dynamics, Genres and Narratives

In the interest of objectivity and amassing a body of evidence, online surveys were conducted. Survey 1 is a structured questionnaire with closed questions, constructed in accordance with SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods (Given, 2008), and thus “worded to eliminate possibilities for participants to introduce their own topics”. Questions were constructed based on the perceived gaps during the case study phase and listed below. The questions as well as the findings are listed under “Results”, as it is an instrument which this study has produced, after it was deemed viable and necessary. This survey is to be viewed as an instrument which supplements or even enables the completion of case study analysis. The theory being tested is that
the game industry market is saturated with certain game dynamics, genres and narratives.

[…] counting how often codes occur is helpful in clarifying whether reality is in accordance with the overall impressions gained by the researcher (Morgan 1993, Polit and Hungler 1993, Silverman 1993 cited in Hewitt-Taylor, 2001, p.41).

Anonymous participants were asked the following questions in order to provide direct, precise feedback regarding the aforementioned areas of focus. The links to the survey were posted on social media, more specifically Facebook (Zuckerberg, 2004) and Reddit (Huffman and Ohanian, 2005), within groups which contain large concentrations of the gamer population. The questions aimed at demographics and the resulting data only serve the purpose of showing the variety of participants.

Questions — Survey #1: Saturation and "staleness" in digital video games

1) How many years of gaming experience do you have behind you?
2) In which world region did you spend the largest part of your life?
3) Are you fed up with a certain activity (game dynamic) in games, due to it being too frequent? Please list as many as you would like.
4) Do you often see/hear others complaining about saturation (being fed up) with a certain activity (dynamic) in games, due to it being too frequent? Which activities are they? List as many as you want.
5) Is there a type of game (or a genre) you don't like anymore because of saturation (you're fed up with this type, the industry makes too many games of this type)? List as many as you want.
6) Is there a type of game (or a genre) you still play in spite of saturation (you like this kind of game even though the industry makes too many games of this type)?
7) Is there a recurring type of story (narrative, theme) that you think has been used too much and that you would like to see less of? Please write which type of story it is, if any.
Results, based on 81 participants which responded to the online survey:

How many years of gaming experience do you have behind you?

81 responses

- 37% 0-1
- 24.7% 1-5
- 8.6% 5-10
- 25.9% 10-20
- 20-30
- 30+

In which world region did you spend the largest part of your life?

80 responses

- 55% Europe
- 27.5% North America
- 16.3% Asia
- 12.5% Africa
- 12.5% Australia (+ Oceania)
- 12.5% South America

Figure 4. Demographics of Survey #1

Spanning across five questions, the following categories of game dynamics, genres and narratives received notable counts:

- Fetch/kill/gather quests, no-substance quests, grinding, busywork (65)
- FPS/3PS Shooters, Battle Royale (50)
- Ideal hero/the chosen one, good-vs-evil, save the world (33)
- Open-World Action-Adventure/RPG (20)
- Microtransactions, pay-to-win, paywall, loot boxes (18)
- RPG, JRPG, MMORPG (16)
- Strategy, 4x strategy, Grand strategy, RTS (9)
- 20th/21st century war (7)

The rest of the raw codes can be found in Appendix 1.
From the data sample, groups can be compared based on Steam User Tags to see which one receives a higher count for elements which are perceived as saturated ("stale", stereotypical, safe).

The count of codes within different categories can also be seen as overlapping in certain instances and it can hence be combined. Shooter dynamics overlap with FPS genre and war narratives, survival horror stories are all but equal to the survival horror genre, etc. Often a categorization (connection between codes) is revealed by the participants who speak of several codes as if they are one and the same, for instance “fetch x, kill y wolves, collect z tails” in context with meaningless, repetitive, low/no substance quests, grinding or busywork.

6.75% of the answers were negative (along the lines of "No, not really, not sure, can’t recall, can't think of any"), though the same user often provided relevant data through another question.

Some participants seem to struggle with placing certain games into genres. Their feedback and views contain well known games paired with very unorthodox genre "choices", which is a good example of the findings and reflections of Arsenault (2009), but also Apperley (2006), and Clearwater (2011). It is therefore crucial, during the case study phase, to use the concept of genre in accordance with these studies. More specifically, if a genre can be easily assigned to a game, there are no indicators of differentness to be found there, for this particular release, and vice versa. Furthermore, it is important not to view the genre as separate from dynamics, narrative or player experience. Even though the shooter dynamic, contemporary shooter genres and monetization mechanics received a vastly higher count than the rest of the coded material, the remainder can neither be further categorized nor ignored in the CCA of individual titles. It is, however, problematic to apply it based on any kind of scale so it is advised that each researcher "ingests" the feedback from this survey and applies it in their descriptive/interpretative endeavors, while getting immersed in the player experience and distancing themselves from it simultaneously (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Immersion is especially important if one attempts to project the player experience using the game-designer perspective.

Participants often confuse genres with one another, game dynamics and game spaces with genres and vice versa, partly due to genres being loosely defined and applied in the first place. For instance, “open world rpg”, “ARPG” and “open world
action”, FPS and 3PS/battle royale, metroidvania and roguelike, in conjunction with
the name of a particular release. Arsenault (2009) even notes examples of reviewers
making the same error (confusing camera angles with one another). It is therefore
recommended that the researcher familiarize themselves with the entire feedback
given in the survey, while using the final counts/categories as a guide in the
qualitative analysis of reviews and other material.

**Survey 2 — Rating the Levels of Differentness**

Survey 2 was devised based on a 7-point Likert scale, using the categories given in
the Related Research chapter. Intermediate categories were added in order to increase
accuracy, which is assessed as necessary by utilizing the Constant Comparative
Method (Glaser and Strauss, 2009) during the case study phase. A single question was
asked, supplemented by the explanation of the ratings contained within the 7-point
scale. Participants proceeded to rate each of the 52 games from the data sample, while
skipping the ones they haven’t played.

**Question — Survey #2: Level of Differentness in Top-Selling Games**

How different are these games compared to older games? Rate the games' Inno-
vation Level based on the given scale. (1=Stale, 2=Stale/Neutral, 3= Neutral,
4=Neutral/Evolved, 5=Evolved, 6=Evolved/Innovative, 7=Innovative). Please only
rate the games you played!

The question is followed by list of 52 games to rate with a randomized order, a
feature enabled by Google Forms (Google, 2019). The exact phrasing of the question
and instructions are given in Appendix 2. It is expressed in colloquial terms, as the
average participant might not understand nor respond well to precise, academic
formulation. The list of games can be found in Appendix 3.
Figure 5. Box and Whiskers plot, based on 91 participants of Survey #2
The left half represents the Indie group, while the right one represents AAA releases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indie</th>
<th>AAA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.37790815</td>
<td>3.469006821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.493494669</td>
<td>0.467008411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>4.728833592</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.000009412545478</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.675905025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.000018825090955</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.008559112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. The result of a t-test — A significant difference between the two sample groups of unequal variance (Welch, 1947)

As Figure 5. shows, the distribution of ratings tends to be much higher in the first, indie group of the data sample. With the lowest possible rating of 1 and the highest rating of 7, mean value of the indie group is 0.909 higher than the mean value of the AAA group, which amounts to 15.15% of the rating-scale. The p-value is extremely low, as shown in figure 6, but due to the exploratory nature of this study and the
limited number of participants (91), this cannot be taken as a validation of the hypothesis nor as any sort of a confirmatory result, evidence of a significant difference between groups. It only shows that Survey 2 can be used as a viable instrument in the event of a confirmatory study, instead of this exploratory pilot. Further observations regarding the improvement of the survey can be found in the Reflection/Discussion section.

This particular survey seems to deliver concrete results, based on this particular data sample, but if one was to move further “down” the list when it comes to sales and exposure, it is likely that the general public would be unable to provide any ratings. In other words, this survey becomes progressively less viable the lower the exposure of releases is — it cannot be applied as an instrument regardless of exposure.
Reflection/Discussion

Data Sampling

The sampled data as well as the results pertain to PC releases limited to the Steam platform, not the entirety of AAA game “population” nor the equivalent Indie games as a whole. One could heuristically assess the more obscure Indie releases as even more diverse, but their sheer quantity makes this assessment a mere guess. Without Steam’s “Indie” tag-classification and best-selling game list, sampling becomes extremely difficult and the author of this study didn’t find a viable solution for it.

An outlier was identified in the data sample, utilizing the definitions of open and closed innovation (Lichtenthaler, 2011, Vardaxoglou and Baralou, 2012). A rare example of innovation conducted completely outside of the IP-owner company — DOTA 2 (Valve Corporation, 2013), the sequel in a franchise which started as a game modification created independently of Valve, its current owner. Examples of the opposite (an Indie company acquiring rights to an innovative, genre-generating “AAA” game) don’t exist, needless to say. This kind of practice does not qualify as an outsourced innovation of the open kind. Not only did it start outside of the firm, it was already released, tried and tested within the domain of the opposing, indie group. It had already gained a sizable popularity and momentum without any financial backing nor exposure through advertising, before its IP was acquired by the current owner.

Since this study is interested only in development tendencies of the AAA publishers, this (extremely rare) example will not be included in the data sample. Examples of open innovation, where the affluent, incumbent firm invests in a risky, untested game design idea, do qualify for this study’s data sample, needless to say. A dilemma still remains regarding its placement. If the origin of the idea, the entire development process, release and even popularization of a finished game, its testing against a wide audience of users all took place within the “Indie” category, does this make the entire subsequent franchise “Indie”, or does the “intervention” of an incumbent, affluent firm, the purchase of an established and tested game and further development place it within the “AAA” category? Furthermore, does this kind of occurrence constitute a third, intermediate category? Though this author leans strongly towards the “Indie”
option in this instance, it would be wrong to assume this is enough to reach a conclusion, so this is left to future studies and deliberations.

**Surveys**

Both surveys could be further “fortified” regarding the understanding of questions on the side of the participants. It would appear that no precautionary measure is surplus in an attempt to ensure that participants don’t skip, misunderstand or ignore certain parts of questions and instructions, when doing online surveys. Releases (the data sample) can be refined and restricted to last year’s releases only, to minimize the potential errors some participants seem to make. More specifically, some appear to rate games compared to latest releases, not to releases older than the game being rated.

In Survey 1, even though the “walking simulator” term has been mentioned a significant amount of times within the results, it seems that it’s a novel, possibly fleeting, hyped up quasi-genre with a misleading name (Kill Screen, 2016, Campbell, 2016), not like there’s an onslaught of these games flooding the market, pushing the rest out of the picture. It also appears to be a relatively young term and, summa summarum, it is very unlikely that there’s any real saturation (“staleness”) to it and there’s even evidence to the contrary. Still as this is genuine user input, it needs to be given some thought.

As expected with mass online surveys, it appears that some participants don’t read the questions very thoroughly, and instead skip on to the rating section. Some participants left comments under the link to the Survey 2, complaining about having to rate games they didn’t play, when the instructions specifically state these games should be skipped. It is therefore advised to add a control question before the rating phase. The mandatory question needs to state: “Please only rate the perceived *difference* of the games you played and *skip* the games you didn’t play!” and make sure that they answer positively before accepting their results as valid.

Another measure that would increase the validity of ratings would be removing the games which were published prior to 2018. This way, even the participants that didn’t read or understand the instructions have a greatly increased chance of comparing the releases to *older* games, as the instructions state.
Case Studies

One could potentially perform a qualitative content analysis upon all available reviews and even quantitatively analyse the ratio of statements regarding the game elements used in this study, but this would only work in the AAA scenario, whereas indie games don't have as many dedicated reviews, which would result in a dead end, a disbalance or inability to analyse the more obscure Indie games. Same is true of surveys, which leaves the case study and similar, more detailed methods as the only viable solutions which apply to all kinds of releases, regardless of their level of exposure. However, in the event of a subsequent, confirmatory study, as Gerring (2007) remarks, the case study process would become more of a cross-case method, due to the sheer amount of cases required to demonstrate a significant difference between the groups being analysed.

When looking for evidence via archival inquiry, one must be very careful and only compare against releases older than the case which is currently being studied. The primary source of data appear to be game reviews, as they reveal an aggregate description of the player experience, derived from many different, independent players (reviewers). Due to the highly interpretative nature of coding in this instance, it is important that eventual future researchers are well trained for the coding process and are given clear instructions. Ideally the reviews will refer to the actual differentness parameter (as revealed in the examples) and this kind of data arguably carries more “weight” than the rest of the materials and themes.

During the analysis, one must strive to ignore assessments of quality regarding the elements being analysed, while looking for answers to questions regarding newness and differentness. This becomes difficult when they overlap and the researcher needs to assess and separate relevant data from the surplus.

Paradoxically, researchers need to both immerse themselves in the data and conversely distance themselves from the data so as to reveal theme, and to assess and examine the accuracy of the coding process. (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p.110)

After each meticulously processed game release, researchers should ideally gather to compare results, discuss eventual new findings, levels of data saturation, revise questions and resources invested. For example, once it is assessed that the narrative elements and game-space elements consistently yield no results, the researcher can
begin to employ heuristics to decide whether or not to skip this theme in the coding process, until a game release is found which instantly appears to have unorthodox properties connected to these elements.

After the second case study (Results/Rocket League section of this paper), it was becoming increasingly more clear that the game dynamics are the more viable element to utilize in the search of differentness. On the example of Rocket league, while it would be virtually impossible to compare each game mechanic on its own with every release ever made, a combination of simple heuristics and comparison to similar games (if any) should allow the researcher to deduce whether the dynamics (on the example of the "Rumble" mode, for instance) have existed prior to the release of Rocket League.

They offer a "shortcut", so to speak, one which is in compliance with the theoretical framework of Costikyan (2005b), Ralph and Monu (2014, 2015) and Vahlo et al. (2017). While analysing each game mechanic on its own seemingly doesn't yield satisfactory results and consumes a lot of resources, doing the same upon game dynamics appears to have an opposite effect — yielding more relevant results in a much shorter amount of time. What’s more, the player experience itself doesn’t often rely on separate mechanics (turn left, turn right, brake, accelerate) as much as it does on their combination, a.k.a. dynamics (drive the car at high speed through thick downtown traffic).

During digital gameplay, the player does not merely take individual isolated actions and enact detached game mechanics. The player does not just steer the car or change a gear. Instead, she drives the car. (Vahlo et al, 2017, p.90)

After some deliberation, it is assessed that genre, mechanics and dynamics should be viewed and analysed as a group in the interest of practicality — dynamics reveal existing and create new genres. It would be redundant to separate them and struggle with placing findings into either category.
Conclusion

Among the methods and instruments tested within this study, it appears that there are no universally applicable ones, those which can be used in conjunction with other data samples, regardless of their level of exposure. Case studies rely on reviews to avoid succumbing to subjectivity of a single researcher relying on archival inquiry, interpretation and constant comparison. The materials being studied are varied and highly nuanced, hence as the study delves deeper into the data, the work might prove overwhelming and strenuous. If reviews for a particular release were scarce, the case study method would probably need to be executed by several expert researchers, which would compare their findings in the interest of increased objectivity.

Survey type 1, which yields qualitative data regarding the saturation of genres, dynamics and narrative tropes, is a universally applicable tool but it doesn’t yield direct results which can be used for comparison of groups which were the focus of this particular study. As such, it is a useful component which supplements the case study, though its results can be presented as standalone research, if one were to increase the number of participants as well as ensure their motivation to provide relevant, punctual answers.

Survey type 2 yields relevant quantitative data regarding this particular data sample (52 high-exposure PC games from the Steam platform, divided into two groups of equal size) but its usefulness is significantly (exponentially) lower when applied to less popular releases. Similar to survey type 1, the number of participants needs to be increased and their understanding of the question assured, to avoid “tainting” of the results with surplus ratings. In certain scenarios, its results can be used as a standalone instrument of confirmation and in others, as a supplement for the purpose of triangulation.

The results of this exploratory endeavour are probably useful, not only to a potential confirmatory study which would focus on the same area of interest, but to studies with different research questions as well. On their own, some parts of this study might prove interesting and useful to game designers and others who seek to avoid further saturation and produce different, innovative games which have a good chance to perform well on the market, as well as steer the game industry away from its soulless, subcultural path which is void of substance and ridden with plagiarism.
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Appendix 1 — Raw codes from Survey 1

Question 3 (stale game dynamics, self):
fetch-and-gather quests (9), quests with no substance (6), repetitive quests (5),
grinding (10), busywork (7), “unlocking” content (1), microtransactions (5), paywall
(1), loot boxes (1), pay-to-win (2), platform jumping (1), button-mashing (1), online-
only games (1), MMO (1), open-world (2), long travelling between activities (3),
escort quests (1), shooting (3), linear narrative (1), excessive audio narration during
play (1), cutscenes (2), embedded narrative (1), bullet-sponge enemies (2), power-
fantasy (1), over-the-shoulder camera (1), high random encounter rates (1), sneaking
(1), incremental upgrades (1), quick-time events (2), RNG outcomes/rewards (1),
crafting (4), inventory management (1), sailing (1), base building (1)

Question 4 (stale game dynamics, others):
grinding (8), fetch/collect quests (11), low/no substance quests (6), busywork (2),
microtransactions (6), pay-to-win (2), loot boxes (1), open-world online (1), online-
only (2), open-world (3), escort quests (4), timed missions (1), linear narrative (1),
linear dialogue (1), walking simulators (2), toxic players (1), dying (extreme
difficulty) (1), quick-time events (2), on-rails (1), backtracking (1), inclusivity (1),
tower climbing (1), (hyper)realism (1)

Question 5 (genre saturation, self):
Shooters (4), FPS (11), Multiplayer FPS (2), Battle Royale (9), Open World
Action/RPG (13), JRPG (5), Survival Horror (3), Life-simulation (1), Multiplayer (2),
MMO (2), MOBA (1), Old Arcade (1), Car racing (3), Sports (2), Match-Three Puzzle
(3), Annual-release franchise games (1), Strategy (2), Platformers (2), early access
survival games (1), Roguelike (1), Hack & slash (1), Card Games (1), most “AAA”
(2), visual novel (1), walking simulators (3), endless-runner (1)
Question 6 (genre saturation, others):

FPS (15), Shooters (2), Battle Royale (6), RPG (7), JRPG (1), MMORPG (3), Racing Games (4), Fighting (3), Puzzle Platformers (1), Walking Simulators (1), Classic Puzzles (1), Open World Action/RPG (7), MOBA (2), Puzzle (1), Sports (1), Card Games (2), Action-Adventure (like Zelda) (1), Post-apoc (1), Survival (1), Fixed-screen retro shooters / Shoot’em’up (2), 4X strategy (2), Grand Strategy (1), Strategy (3), RTS (1), Roguelike (2), CMS (1), Metroidvania (1), Stealth (1), Beat’em’up (1)

Question 7 (narrative saturation)

Save the world (10), America saves the world (2), the chosen one (10), the ideal hero trope (5), stereotypical good-vs-evil, hero-vs-villain (5), evil empire (1), rescue the girl/damsel (5), 20th/21st century war (7), zombies (3), survival horror stories (1), white straight (middle aged, soldier) male protagonist (2), macho protagonist (1), amnesia (2), vengeance (2), movie tropes (1), sci-fi (2), modern-time non-fantasy stories (1), high fantasy (1), post-apocalypse (1), car racing (1), out-of-place inclusivity story elements (1), good (happy) ending (1), shoehorned love story (1), “anything AAA” (1), shoehorned school setting (1)
Appendix 2 — Survey 2 question and instructions

The exact format of the Survey 2 question and instructions for survey participants:

Level of DIFFERENTNESS in Top-Selling Games

How ~different~ are these games compared to older games?

Rate the games’ Innovation Level based on the given scale.
PLEASE ONLY RATE THE GAMES YOU PLAYED!

1) Stale (the gameplay/idea has been done too many times)
   2) Stale/Neutral
3) Neutral (not much new but not too similar to older games)
   4) Neutral/Evolved
5) Evolved (some new features, expanding of old features)
   6) Evolved/Innovative
7) Innovative (completely new mechanics/dynamics/genre)

[52 games from the data sample (Appendix 3), with 7-point Likert-Scale rating options next to each separate release]

Figure 7. Example-excerpt of ratings from anonymous participant #6 (out of 91)
Appendix 3 — Game List and Groups

Indie (n=26): *Kingdom Come: Deliverance, Path of Exile, Rocket League, Divinity: Original Sin 2, No Man’s Sky, Euro Truck Simulator 2, Frostpunk, Subnautica, The Forest, Raft, SCUM, Human: Fall Flat, They Are Billions, Deep Rock Galactic, Rimworld, Terraria, Darkest Dungeon, Garry’s Mod, Rust, Stardew Valley, Don’t Starve Together, Insurgency: Sandstorm, House Flipper, Two Point Hospital, Slay the Spire, Factorio*


Source: “Top Sellers Of 2018 So Far”, (Steam, 2018).