Doctoral Dissertation

Academic Year 2020

Play Across Cultural Borders:

An Explorative Cross-Cultural Study of Digital Game Player Experience by Analyzing User Reviews and Think-Aloud Protocols

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Abstract

Digital games are the fastest growing medium of our time. Their proliferation and prominent role in society have sparked public debates and led to the development of "game studies", an academic field of research examining games, players, their contexts, and their interactions. However, regional differences in the production and consumption of games are empirically evident and pose challenges to the games industry and academia. A lack of systematic cross-cultural research within game studies significantly limits our ability to ascertain the applicability of empirical and theoretical contributions across regional and cultural divides and impedes our understanding of the transregional aspects of games, players, and play. This lack also results in a substantial gap in our knowledge on whether and how players' cultural contexts influence player-game interaction and their experience and evaluation of games, making it difficult to explain differing patterns of player preferences and to model the processes of meaning-making during play. To close this gap, this thesis (1) develops a theoretical and methodological framework for the cross-cultural comparison of player experience and (2) uses this framework in an approximation of a most-different case design to compare German and Japanese players' experiences of 18 selected Japanese games. The framework integrates ontological models of games and player-game interaction with an analytical differentiation of player cultures, and combines two highly synergetic methodological approaches, the analysis of user reviews and recorded play sessions using think-aloud protocol. 21,359 German and Japanese user reviews and 207 hours of think-aloud play sessions with 20 participants were analyzed, following a grounded theory approach. Based on the results, a dictionary for a quantitative analysis was constructed and utilized to verify the findings. Results indicate that players' national cultural background influences their experience of audio-visual and narrative game elements but not of game mechanics. Overall, sub- and transnational player culture appears more influential on the experience of game elements than national culture. This leads to an empirically grounded model of how culture influences player-game interaction and can be used to explain and predict patterns of user preferences and game evaluation across cultural borders. The framework and dictionary developed for this study can serve as a model for a broad range of comparative studies on media cultures and audiences.

Keywords: Digital games; player experience; comparative cross-cultural analysis; user reviews; think-aloud protocol

Acknowledgments

This thesis is the product of more than three years of continuous research. It is also the product of more than three years of warm and continuous support by my academic advisors, fellow students, friends, and family. First, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor Prof. Ikumi Waragai, for her patience and kind encouragement throughout my PhD studies. Without her open mind and unwavering support on academic matters and beyond, it would never have been possible to finish this thesis.

My sincere gratitude also goes to the members of my academic advisory group. Prof. Yasushi Kiyoki inspired me through his passion for research and encouraged me to constantly widen my perspective. Prof. Takahiro Kunieda's insightful comments and questions have helped me in clarifying my own thoughts and the contribution of this thesis. I am especially grateful to the final member of my advisory group, Dr. Shuichi Kurabayashi from Cygames, Inc., whose close guidance and dedication to academic excellence have helped me to constantly challenge myself over the last three years. My research benefited greatly from it.

Further thanks go to Dr. Yukiko Sato, for her persistent support throughout this journey since our time as master's students. Without her, this thesis would not have been written.

As a research assistant in the Keio University Global Environmental System Leaders Program (GESL), I received generous financial and ideational support, while the system of international trainings made it possible to gather material and search for participants directly in Germany. I would like to thank the academic and administrative staff and my fellow GESL students for the fantastic experience these three years have been. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Shinnosuke Obi for his guidance in my minor research project.

I gratefully acknowledge that parts of this thesis were financially supported by Cygames, Inc. the Yamaoka Memorial Foundation, the Taikichiro Mori Memorial Research Fund, the Keio SFC Academic Society and the Keio University Doctorate Student Grant-in-Aid program. I was also supported by a MEXT Honors Scholarship for the first two years of my PhD studies.

I am indebted to the nine German and eleven Japanese participants who agreed to contribute their time for this study and would like to thank Prof. Martin Roth and the jLab staff at Leipzig University for letting me use their facilities for part of the play sessions, and Riina Kuno and Akiko Miyazaki for their support in the transcription of the Japanese think-aloud protocols.

Last, but certainly not least, I am grateful to my family and friends, who have been extraordinarily supportive and tolerant of me throughout these years. Without you, this thesis would never have taken shape. Thank you!

List of Related Publications

Peer-reviewed journal articles

- Brückner, Stefan, Shuichi Kurabayashi, and Ikumi Waragai. 2020. "Japanese Digital Games in Germany: A Case Study of Gameplay Across Cultural Borders." *Keio SFC Journal* 19 (2):330-350.

- Brückner, Stefan, Yukiko Sato, Shuichi Kurabayashi, and Ikumi Waragai. 2019. "Exploring Cultural Differences in Game Reception: JRPGs in Germany and Japan." *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association (ToDIGRA)* 4 (3):209-243.

Peer-reviewed conference presentations (full paper)

- Brückner, Stefan, Yukiko Sato, Shuichi Kurabayashi, and Ikumi Waragai. 2018. "The Handling of Personal Information in Mobile Games." In *Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 10714*, edited by A. D. Cheok, M. Inami and T. Romão, 415-429. Cham: Springer.

Peer-reviewed conference presentations (short paper)

- Brückner, Stefan, Shuichi Kurabayashi, Yukiko Sato, and Ikumi Waragai. 2019. "Analyzing Random Reward System Mechanics and Social Perception." Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2019_paper_169.pdf.

Oral conference presentations

- Brückner, Stefan. 2019. “Chartering the Context: Player Experience Across Cultures.” Presented at the *DiGRA 2019 Doctoral Consortium*, August 6-10, Kyoto, Japan.

- Brückner, Stefan. 2018. “Examining Differences in German and Japanese Player Experience: A Grounded Theory Approach.” *Presented at Replaying Japan* 2018, August 20-22, Nottingham, UK.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

3DS	Nintendo 3DS
ARPG	Action role-playing game
DiGRA	Digital Games Research Association
DLC	Downloadable content
ESA	Entertainment Software Association
HCI	Human-computer-interaction
JRPG	Japanese role-playing game
NPC	Non-player character
PC	Personal Computer
PS3	PlayStation 3
PS4	PlayStation 4
PX	Player Experience
RPG	Role-playing game
RTA	Retrospective think-aloud
Switch	Nintendo Switch
TAP	Think-aloud protocol
ToCS	The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel
UI	User Interface
UX	User Experience

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Digital games[1], games mediated by digital devices, have become a culturally and socially highly influential medium and are a fixture in our everyday lives (Chatfield 2011; Muriel and Crawford 2018). In 2019, more than 2.9 billion people frequently played games worldwide (Statista 2019b). The audience of games, their players, is highly diverse in concern to gender, age and nationality (ESA 2019) and the games industry as well is characterized by a strong degree of globalization (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009), accelerated by an ongoing shift towards online forms of content distribution. Digital games are a global phenomenon, that bring about social controversies (Strasburger and Donnerstein 2014) but also give rise to new forms of communicative practices and communities (cf. Nardi 2010). Games and principles of game design have the potential to positively affect our society, for example by facilitating new forms of learning (e.g. Bedwell et al. 2012). Since their beginning in the 1950s, digital games have truly "changed our world" (McGonigal 2011), as they are intricately linked towards, and often pioneer, the emergence of new forms of cultural practices within our increasingly digitalized society, in which "an assemblage of technologically mediated experiences [connect] different realities, situations, and culture" (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 12). The proliferation of games and their growing relevance within society, also led to the formation of game studies, an academic research area, focused on the study of games, players, their respective contexts, and their interaction.

However, despite the global reach of digital games, game developers and players alike are often strongly anchored in their respective cultural contexts, influencing the way games are produced, framed and interacted with on the local level (e.g. Consalvo 2016; Zagal and Tomuro 2013). Such "cultural differences" between games and players of different regions pose challenges for (small- and medium scale) game developers, publishers and localizers in disseminating their games, as they often lack reliable information on their target populations (e.g. Byford 2014; e.g. Grubb 2015; Richey 2014). More fundamentally, they also impact the academic study of

[1] "Digital game" is used throughout this thesis as the most inclusive term applicable to games, mediated by digital devices. Other commonly used terms, such as "video game" or "computer game" are often used synonymously but can also be interpreted to refer to games on a specific platform. If not described otherwise, the term "game" in this thesis refers to "digital games".

games, as they potentially limit the scope and applicability of game research across cultural and regional borders.

The recognition of such differences has led towards a "regional turn" within game studies, an ongoing shift of attention towards the local level to "extend the field's ability to engage with important global issues and enrich game studies with new perspectives and concepts" (Liboriussen and Martin 2016). While this provides valuable new insights into players and the way they interact with games in specific regions (e.g. Huhh 2008; Ng 2006), it does not account for the transregional dynamics of games and play. This requires systematic cross-cultural comparisons, which remain rare within game studies (cf. Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018). In particular, the lack of such comparisons severely limits our understanding of how exactly culture relates to player-game interaction and whether and how it influences it. This is a major deficit in the current body of knowledge, as it prevents us from explaining empirically evident differences in player preference patterns and hinders our understanding of the processes of meaning-making during player-game interaction.

To close this research gap and to provide the basis for further comparative studies (i.e. a "comparative turn"), this thesis develops a theoretical and methodological framework for the cross-cultural comparative analysis of players' experiences of games, to clarify the influence of players' cultural backgrounds on player-game interaction. The framework integrates current research on player experience (e.g. Wiemeyer et al. 2016) originating in the field of Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI), ontological concepts of games (e.g. Schell 2008) and player-game interaction (e.g. Calleja 2011), with a transnational multi-level model of player and game cultures (Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018). This theoretical foundation (see Chapter 2) is combined with a highly synergetic methodological approach that combines an analysis of user reviews with an analysis of recorded play sessions using think-aloud protocol. User reviews are available in high quantity and reflect the experiences of a broad range of players. But they are written after play and therefore affected by memory biases. It is also difficult to assert who wrote them and what other biases are present in them. In the recorded play sessions data is recorded during play and as such less affected by bias. Participants can be chosen based on theoretical considerations, such as their general preferences, prior experiences, or sub-cultural identity. Through the combination of these two methods, it is possible to account for different forms of bias while introducing a means of triangulation for the results (see. Section 3.1).

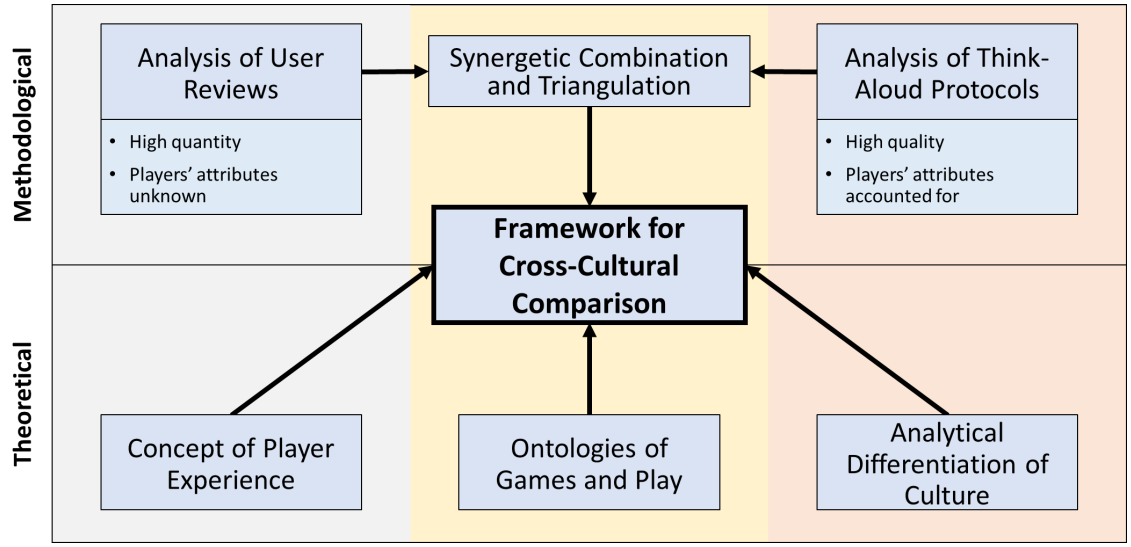


Figure 1 Overview of the developed theoretical and methodological framework and its components

The framework (see Figure 1) is employed in a comparative analysis of German and Japanese players' experiences of a sample of 18 Japanese games[2]. Current academic and industrial debates point towards especially salient differences between "Eastern" (i.e. Japan, China, South Korea) and "Western" (i.e. North America and Europe) games and audiences (Consalvo 2016; Kanerva 2015; Uchiki and Xu 2018; cf. Game Refinery 2018). This perceived dichotomy has taken deep roots in broader digital game discourses among scholars and players alike, promoting a "binary perspective" (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 84) of "East" and "West", based on notions of the supposed uniqueness of Eastern (especially Japanese) games and players (cf. Pelletier-Gagnon 2011; Schules 2015). Scholars have repeatedly attempted to examine these differences (e.g. Consalvo 2006, 2009a, 2016; de Pablos 2016; Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015) but the above-mentioned "research gap in comparative game studies" (Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018, 81) severely limits our ability to make assertions as to how exactly the way players experience and evaluate games differs across regions and cultural boundaries.

Consequently, the main research questions guiding this thesis are the following: Are there differences in the experience and evaluation of games between players from different cultural backgrounds? And if yes, of what kind are they? Methodologically, in contrast to prior studies (e.g. Zagal and Tomuro 2013; for a research overview see Section 1.3) an inductive bottom-up approach, following grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1967;

[2] "Japanese games" here refers to games produced by a Japanese developer, by a predominantly Japanese staff as indicated in the game's credits.

Strübing 2014) is employed. This is done for the following reasons: (1) There is currently no theoretical framework to holistically account for similarities or differences in the experience of players across regions, (2) existing concepts to measure the experience of players, such as immersion or involvement (see Section 2.4) are limited to specific aspects of player-game interaction, and (3) a qualitative bottom-up examination, accompanied by close readings, makes it possible to account for subtle differences hard to examine through quantitative methods. This approach enables the creation of an empirically grounded system of categories by which players' experiences can be compared across cultural borders, thereby providing the necessary basis for a comprehensive cross-cultural analysis. Based on these categories, a dictionary for the quantitative examination of player experience was constructed and utilized to verify the results of the qualitative analysis.

Table 1 Top ten countries by games revenue in 2019 (Source: Newzoo 2019)

Country	**Population**	**Revenue 2019 (USD)**	**Revenue per Capita USD**
USA	329 million	36,869 million	112.06
China	1,420 million	36,540 million	25.73
Japan	127 million	18,952 million	149,22
Republic of Korea	51 million	6,194 million	121.45
Germany	82 million	6,012 million	73.31
United Kingdom	67 million	5,616 million	83.82
France	65 million	4,019 million	61.83
Canada	37 million	2,772 million	74.91
Spain	46 million	2,735 million	59.45
Italy	59 million	2,689 million	45.52

The choice to compare German and Japanese players experience and evaluation of selected Japanese games is made in approximation of a most-different case design (Bennett 2004). As explained above, differences between players are assumed to be most salient between Japan and "the West". A comparison of Japanese and Western players is therefore arguably most conducive in clarifying differences between players from culturally different regions. German players are an ideal "Western" counterpart for this analysis for the following reasons. First, Germany is the biggest Western market for games after the US (see Table 1). Second, Germany

is a prime example of a mature games market without a strong domestic games industry, open to a variety of contents from a wide range of countries, including Japanese games (cf. game 2019). Third, shifting the focus from the US towards Europe and Japan is congruent with current research trends towards regional game studies (Liboriussen and Martin 2016), where the implicit focus on the North American region, apparent in many game research projects, is critically discussed. Fourth, and most importantly, focusing on Germany makes it easier to gather data that originates from the intended target population. In comparison, focusing on the US and utilizing English language sources for this study proves difficult, as the inclusion of data originating from players situated in other regions becomes more likely.

The decision to focus on Japanese games is part of the most-different case design, aimed at maximizing the visibility of potential differences between German and Japanese players. Japanese games have been highly successful in the global games market since the crash of the North American games market in 1983 (Dillon 2016; Wolf 2008, 2012) and the launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System (Picard 2013). However, in recent years global market shares have dropped as competition intensified and player preferences developed differently. This decline has been attributed to potential cultural barriers within the games' contents (Byford 2014; Grubb 2015; Richey 2014; cf. Consalvo 2016). Although Japanese games are consumed globally and often produced by transnational corporations influenced by Western production practices (Consalvo 2006), the concrete production process is frequently centered domestically and carried out by dominantly Japanese teams. It is partially this local context of production, that affords Japanese games their perception of uniqueness, encompassing aesthetic, narrative and ludic[3] (i.e. rules and mechanics) elements (Schules 2015; Schules et al. 2018; Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015; Pelletier-Gagnon 2011). Japanese games are available and popular in Germany and Japan (game 2019) and are therefore a class of games for which (1) comparison is possible across regions and (2) previous research exists that makes it possible to account for the range of cultural expressions present in them (see Section 3.2).

The selection of German and Japanese players and Japanese games for the comparative analysis is aimed at maximizing the salience and variation of apparent "cultural differences" in the data. This is complemented by the selection of a relatively narrow sub-set of Japanese games, to

[3] The term "ludic" originates from the latin "ludus" that translates to "game". Within games research, "ludic" is used as an adjective to refer to the mechanics or rules-based components of a game or players' interaction therewith. It can also refer to "playfulness".

limit the number of game-intrinsic variables influencing player experiences and evaluations. Hence, a most-different case design to maximize the visibility of cultural differences is combined with a most-similar case design to heighten analytical clarity and minimize the number of variables to account for within the game sample (cf. Bennett 2004). Concretely, the sample includes Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), a genre perceived to be "uniquely Japanese" (Schules 2015) and other single-player games with non-trivial narrative elements, similar game mechanics and varying degrees of "Japaneseness". By choosing a narrow sample of Japanese games that nevertheless exhibit, for example, different levels of commercial success and comparing how German and Japanese players experience them, it becomes possible to examine the intricately linked multi-level cultures of games and players.

For the comparison, the thesis draws on two sources of empirical data. First a corpus of 21,359 German and Japanese language online user reviews, written in regard for the selected games, was collected. Out of this sample, 460 reviews were qualitatively analyzed. Second, nine German and eleven Japanese players participated in a series of recorded play sessions, using think-aloud protocol (TAP). Each participant was asked to play the same four Japanese games, respectively the localized German version, for at least 2.5 hours per game. This resulted in a rich corpus of approximately ten hours of data per participant and 207 hours of commented gameplay footage in total.

The user reviews and transcribed TAPs were analyzed in a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), following a grounded theory approach (Strübing 2014). Text segments were assigned labels (i.e. codes) based on their meaning. These codes were then grouped together into categories, based on the method of constant comparison (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018), resulting in a hierarchical system of categories, sub-categories and codes, to facilitate the comparison between the German and Japanese data sets on different levels of granularity. Based on the categories that emerged in the qualitative analysis, a dictionary was created to examine the overall corpus of user reviews and TAPs quantitatively.

The results of the analysis indicate overall great similarities between German and Japanese players in how the games are reviewed and described. Notable differences were found in the way they experience and evaluate specific narrative and aesthetic (i.e. audio-visual) elements of the selected games. On the other hand, differences in the experience of ludic elements, such as the amount of freedom attributed to the player within the game, appear less salient between

German and Japanese players and are arguably more directly related to players' personal preferences or the strong representation of specific sub- or transnational player groups.

Differences between German and Japanese players also exist on the meta-level. Overall, Japanese players appear more concerned with a game's narrative elements, especially its characters, and their evaluation of a game's story appears to more strongly influence the overall evaluation of a game than for German players, who are more focused on ludic elements and the game world. Differences are also evident in how games were compared to other games and media and in discourses on the "Japaneseness" of some of the selected games. German players' reactions to this "Japaneseness" can broadly be divided into two categories: (1) Positive reactions, in which Japanese elements are framed as being, nostalgic, unique, exotic, interesting and thought-provoking, with some players seeing it as a way to "experience Japan", and (2) negative reactions, in which elements of the game are framed as being "too Japanese", "too weird" or "too childish" for Western players. The latter is usually related to the respective game's art style and narrative elements and in some cases highlights differing values and societal norms in Japan and Germany, for example in concern to the portrayal of women. As this thesis will discuss, the diverging reception of such elements among German players is one example of the strong influence of players' sub-cultural identities on player experience. Such identities result from interacting layers of culture surrounding the game, as a cultural product, and the player, as an individual shaped by their internalized values and norms and the whole of their prior experiences. They are shaped by, but often transcend regional cultural boundaries.

Based on these results, it is necessary to critically re-examine the term "cultural differences" frequently used in games research (e.g. Brückner et al. 2019; Law et al. 2009; Lee and Wohn 2012; Santoso et al. 2017; Walsh et al. 2010; Zagal and Tomuro 2013) to operationalize what exactly is meant by "culture" and to direct more attention towards the dynamic relationship between player and game cultures on the micro-level of individual player-game interaction, the meso-level of player communities, sub-cultures or preference groups, and the macro-level of national and regional identities and game cultures (cf. Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018).

Overall, this dissertation develops a versatile framework and procedure for cross-cultural research within game studies. Data analysis using this framework results in an empirically grounded model of player experience (i.e. the code system) that facilitates the cross-cultural comparison of players' experiences across different levels of granularity. The results of this comparison clarify how the cultural contexts of game and player affect their interaction and

thereby advances our understanding of meaning making within games and how real-world phenomena influence players' experiences and behavior in virtual worlds.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. First, section 1.2, discusses the current role of games within our society, introduces the emergent academic field of game studies, in which this thesis is located, and presents and defines several core concepts, relevant to this study. It also more clearly outlines the concrete research gap, that is addressed within this work. Section 1.3 reviews the relevant literature for this thesis, especially focusing on research examining the relationship between cultural factors and player-game interaction and player preferences.

In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework is developed by discussing and combining relevant research into the ontological aspects of games and player-game interaction, the relationship between players, games and culture, and the analytical concept of player experience (PX). This includes a discussion of the epistemological challenges that research on PX faces, which is relevant for the development of the methodological approach taken in this thesis, as it is a direct answer to these challenges. At the end of the chapter, the possible influence of localization practices on the experiences of players are briefly discussed. The concepts outlined provide the basis for framing and discussing the results in the following empirical part of the thesis.

Chapter 3 details the methodological part of the framework and the overall research design. First, the sources of data used for this thesis, user reviews and think-aloud protocols, are discussed to clarify how they relate to each other and wherein the high synergetic potential of their combination lies. Second follows an overview of the selected games and target cultures, and the rationale behind their selection. In Section 3.3, the grounded theory approach utilized in the qualitative data analysis is explained, while the remainder of the chapter describes the dataset and concrete methods of data gathering and analysis for the user reviews and TAPs.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis of user reviews (Section 4.1) and think-aloud protocols (Section 4.2). The code system that emerged from analysis is introduced and used to compare the German and Japanese datasets. Similarities and differences are discussed through the frequency and relation of codes, aided by the qualitative data analysis software package MAXQDA to allow for intuitive visualizations of the data. This is supplemented by close readings to provide concrete examples of the data and to directly compare the utterances of German and Japanese players in context.

In the first part of Chapter 5, the results of the analysis of user reviews and the analysis of TAPs are compared and critically examined by drawing on the theoretical concepts introduced in Chapter 2. This provides a contextualized understanding of which differences and similarities were observed and how they relate to current concepts of player-game interaction and different levels of player and game culture. The second part of Chapter 5 evaluates the developed framework and methodological approach and discusses the significance and impact of the findings on current research on games and culture and existing theoretical models of cross-cultural media consumption (i.e. Rohn 2009, 2011; Straubhaar 1991, 2003). Section 5.4 discusses the limitations of the thesis and shows possible venues for further research. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary and the final conclusions of the thesis.

1.2 Digital Games and Game Studies

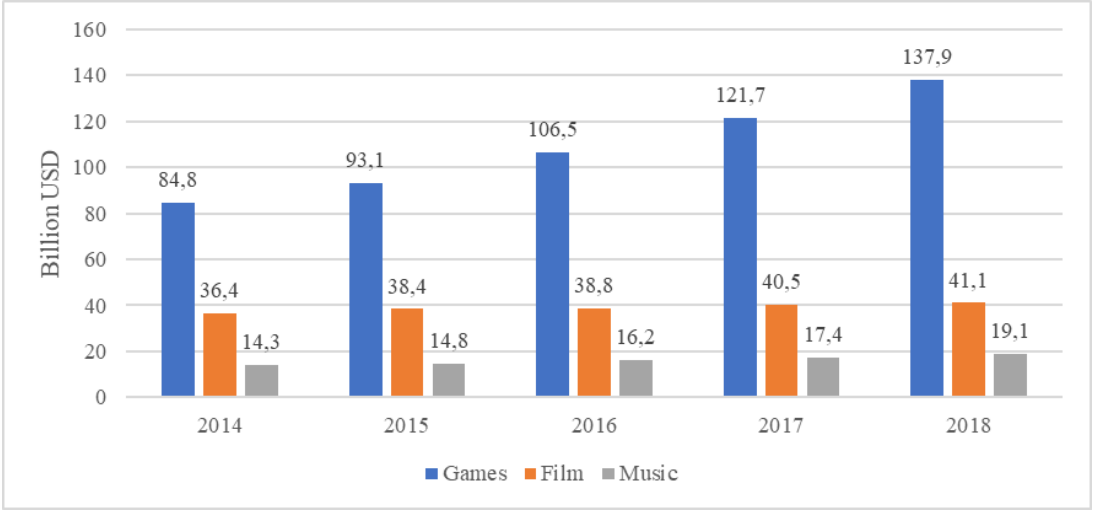


Figure 2 Total market revenue of the global games, music and film markets in billion USD (Source: International Federation of the Phonographic Industry 2019; League of Professional Esports 2018; Newzoo 2018; The Motion Picture Association of America 2018)

In the 21st century digital games have become the dominant form of entertainment media in terms of market revenue (cf. Chatfield 2011). In 2019, more than 2.9 billion people worldwide were estimated to frequently interact with digital games (Statista 2019b). With 137.9 billion USD in revenues in 2018 (Newzoo 2018), the total size of the games market is more than twice the size of the global music and film markets[4] combined (see Figure 2). By the end of 2019,

[4] Film market revenues are based on figures on box-office revenues provided by the Motion Picture Association of America and do not include cable or satellite-tv subscription revenues. The data on the music market, provided by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, does include digital, including streaming, revenues.

the game Grand Theft Auto 5 (Rockstar North 2013) has generated more than 6 billion USD in revenues, making it the highest grossing entertainment product of all time (Batchelor 2018). In comparison, the current highest grossing movie of all times, Avengers: Endgame (Russo and Russo 2018), has generated less than 3 billion USD as of November 2019 (The Numbers 2019).

Since their beginnings in the 1960s, digital games have been a driver of, and been driven by, rapid technological advancements. Their cultural significance is increasingly being recognized by political actors. Governmental funding programs (e.g. Creative Europe Desk Denmark 2016) and initiatives to archive digital games and keep them accessible as cultural artefacts and for further research (e.g. Stiftung Digitale Spielkultur 2016) are becoming more widespread. The influence of games has however grown far beyond their traditional role as entertainment media, as current trends towards the use of games and principles of game design in non-entertainment contexts show. Keywords, such as "serious games", "gamification" or "edutainment" have proven to attract great interest by academics and corporate entities alike and are often seen to have the potential to facilitate new ways of learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2005).

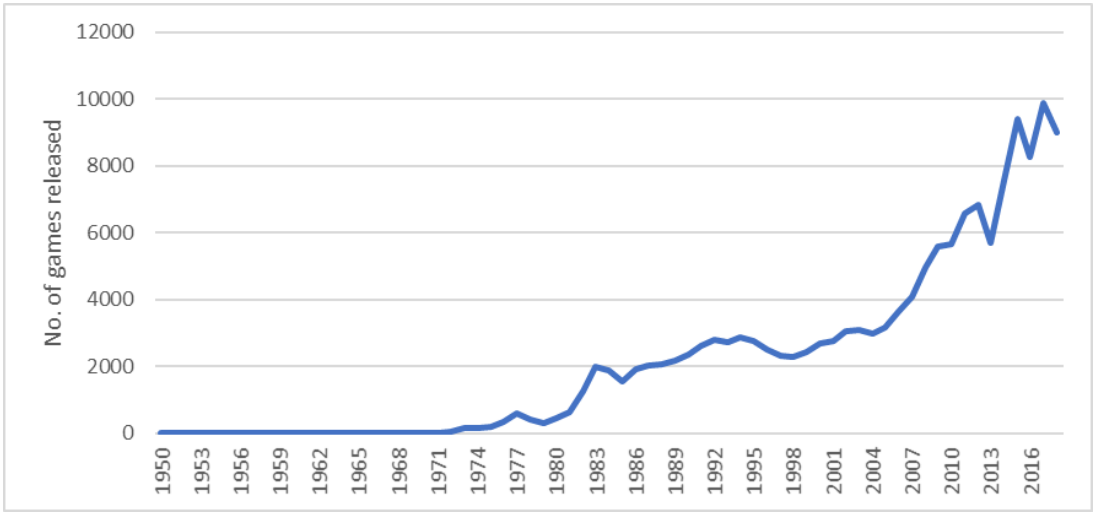


Figure 3 Number of games released per year according to Moby Games (as of September 26, 2019)

The rapid growth of games is also evident in the sheer number of them released every year (see Figure 3). According to the internet database Moby Games[5], 9,015 games were released in

[5] Moby Games (https://www.mobygames.com/) is the most comprehensive database for videogames. Localized versions of games are not counted separately, but games that are released on different platforms are counted for each platform they are released on, i.e. the "same" game is potentially counted multiple times if it is released on multiple platforms. Moby Games relies on user input to account for new games. This causes the database to be less complete for more recent years. According to Statista (2018), 2018 saw 9,050 games released on Steam alone,

2018, amounting to more than 24 games being released on average per day. This growth is spurred by the ongoing shift towards the online distribution of games. The mobile game market is dominated by Apple Inc.'s App Store and Google LLC's Google Play, while Valve's Steam has become the central platform for purchasing personal computer (PC) games. To a lesser degree, such tendencies are also observed in the console game market. In 2009, 20 percent of all games in the US were sold through a digital vendor. This has risen to 83 percent in 2018 (Statista 2019a). Corresponding lower entry barriers into the games market have led to an increase of small-scale, independent (or indie) game developers, contributing towards the diversification of digital games[6].

This phenomenal growth, the dissemination of games and their influential cultural and societal role, has provided the basis for a steadily growing interdisciplinary research field, since 2001 often subsumed under the term "game studies" (Aarseth 2001). Since then, research into digital games, play, players and related social and cultural phenomena has rapidly grown, as the strong increase of academic publications on digital games shows (see Figure 4). Especially influential in this regard was the formation of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) and the, since 2009 annually held, DiGRA conference in 2003 (Crawford 2011). Game studies have grown to become a vibrant field of academic inquiry, characterized by tendencies towards specialization and dispersion of research topics and methodologies (Martin 2018).

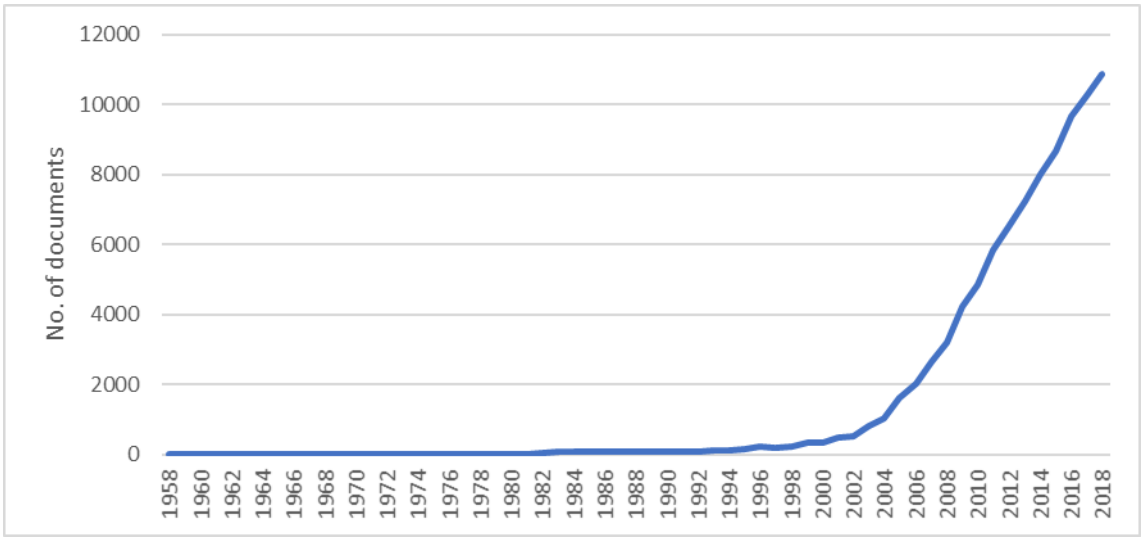


Figure 4 Number of documents on Scopus (www.scopus.com) as of September 26, 2019, including the words "digital game", video game" or "computer game"

which puts the likely total number of games released even higher than the Moby Games data suggests, these numbers are potentially inflated by early-access games and/or downloadable content.

[6] For a closer examination of the term "indie" in the context of game production, see Lipkin (2013).

Current game studies are arguably best characterized by the four main research subjects they focus on (see Figure 5): (1) research on games as artifacts, i.e. ontological debates on how to define or analyze games and how they are constructed (e.g. Aarseth 1997; Juul 2011; Zagal et al. 2007; Zagal and Altizer 2014; Salen and Zimmermann 2003), (2) research on players, their behavior or characteristics (e.g. Braun et al. 2016; Shibuya et al. 2019), (3) research on the specific contexts of player and game, i.e. game production processes (Consalvo 2009a; de Pablos 2014; Miller 2007) or player cultures (e.g. Nardi 2010; Muriel and Crawford 2018; Shaw 2010b) and (4) the interaction between player and game within their respective contexts. While this thesis draws on a broad range of concepts established in game studies, its main focus lies in establishing a better understanding of the interaction between player and game, the outcomes of this interaction, that is the experiences of players, and how these outcomes are influenced by those contextual factors that are often subsumed under the label "cultural differences" or "cultural characteristics" (Brückner et al. 2019; Lee and Wohn 2012; Santoso et al. 2017; Uchiki and Xu 2018; Walsh et al. 2010; Zagal and Tomuro 2013).

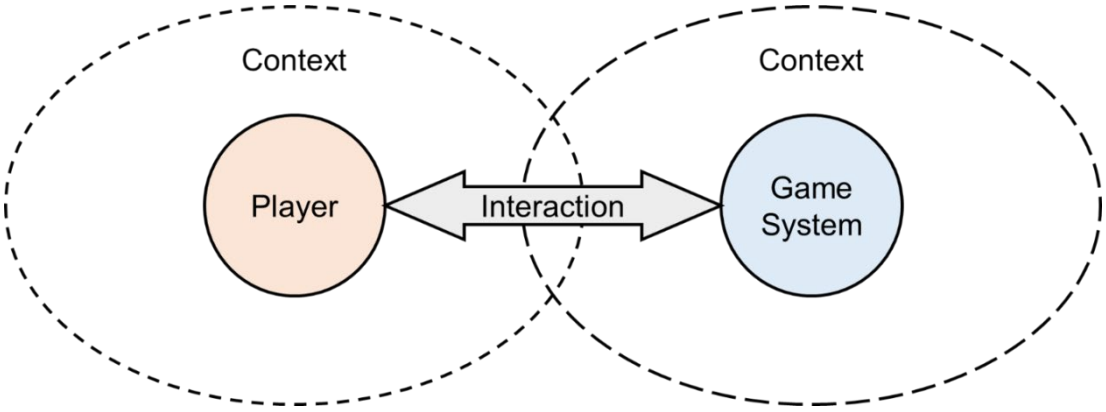


Figure 5 Overview of the main interest areas of game studies

The interaction between player and game, or more specifically between player and game system (i.e. the unit of game software and hardware), is one of the most dynamic fields of game research. Player-game interaction, commonly referred to as "play" or "gameplay", lies at the very heart of game studies, as games, be it as an object or as a process, can only be meaningfully analyzed by playing them (cf. van Vught and Glas 2018). Digital games "are created through the act of gameplay" (Consalvo 2009a, 408). As Calleja argues, "[a] game becomes a game when it is played; until then it is only a set of rules and game props awaiting engagement" (Calleja 2011, 8). The interaction between player and game is the constitutive element of a digital game. Unlike movies, continuous "nontrivial effort is required" (Aarseth 1997, 1) by the player, for the game to unfold. Interactivity is therefore a defining trait of games, "to the degree, that it is tautology to use the expression 'interactive games'" (Mäyrä 2008, 6).

However, while research into player-game interaction is characterized by a growing variety of approaches and theoretical models (Caroux et al. 2015) and the turn towards the regional level has produced rich studies on play in local contexts and the relation between local culture and games (Huhh 2008; Ng 2006; Penix-Tadsen 2016), few studies have examined the impact of players' cultural backgrounds on player preferences or player-game interaction and the resulting experiences. Systematic comparisons across cultural boundaries are even scarcer.

1.3 Gameplay Across Cultural Boundaries: A Research Overview

Game scholars have examined the globalized production and circulation of games (Consalvo 2006, 2009a, 2016; Pelletier-Gagnon 2011), as well as their adaptation and localization for foreign markets (Carlson and Corliss 2011; Consalvo 2012; Di Marco 2007; Esser et al. 2016; Gonzalez 2015; Mandiberg 2015; Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006; O'Hagan 2009a, b, c, 2015; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Pedersen 2015; Schules 2012). We have learnt much about games and game production in transnational contexts. However, comparatively less effort so far has explicitly been put into the influence of cultural factors on player-game interaction. While the influence of cultural factors on user experience and user centric design receives growing attention in the area of human-computer-interaction and user experience research (e.g. Santoso et al. 2017), the complexity of games and their fundamental differences when compared to utility software or websites, such as a comparatively lower importance of usability, make it difficult to directly adapt these results (Wiemeyer et al. 2016).

As with other media, the way players experience, interpret and evaluate video games is inextricably linked to their cultural backgrounds (Consalvo 2006; cf. Rohn 2009, 84-87). Previous research explores various aspects of the relationship between games, players and culture, often focused on the above-mentioned dichotomy between North America and Japan, but, as a whole, does not appear very systematic. Cook (2009) compares Japanese and American players in respect to their desire for control in real-life and within digital games. He finds, that American players favor higher levels of control in their everyday lives, but lower levels within digital games, than Japanese players. Ngai (2005) conducts a survey on the preferences of American and Japanese players, focusing on narrative and gameplay elements and utilizing the concept of immersion (cf. Calleja 2011; Qin et al. 2009; Whitson et al. 2008). While she does not identify any major differences, she argues that Japanese players feel a greater sense of character attachment, while American players disliked it when their gameplay

experience was being interrupted by narrative elements, limiting direct interactivity with and control over the game.

James (2010) similarly examines Japanese and American users' preferences but focuses on the question of what kind of games they prefer. She arrives at the conclusion that Americans prefer multiplayer games, while Japanese prefer single-player games, linking this to values of group-identification vs. individualism (James 2010, 30). Uchiki and Bo (2018) examine smartphone game rankings in various countries, finding the most salient differences between Western and East Asian countries, but also discuss differences between China, Japan and South Korea. Like James, they link their findings to Hofstede's (2010) cultural dimensions. Bialas et al. (2014) also utilize Hofstede's cultural dimensions in their quantitative comparison on cultural influences on play style. They find that players' national culture does influence the way they play, with statistically significant results for an influence on what they term "competitive play style" and "cooperative play style" in an online multiplayer shooting game.

In contrast to these works, and more in line with the intent of this thesis, Zagal and Tomuro (2013) carry out a quantitative analysis of American and Japanese game reviews, using natural language processing (NLP), in order to identify "cultural differences in game appreciation". Their findings suggest that American players care more about the replay value of a game, while Japanese players appear less tolerant of bugs and more strongly concerned with overall quality and polish. Japanese players' expectations towards the quality of Western games also appear lower than towards Japanese games.

In conclusion, while current academic debates in game studies and HCI emphasize the importance of cultural factors on the experience of users or players, concrete research in this regard still appears limited. Bialas et al. (2014), Cook (2009) and Ngai (2005) utilized game statistics or conducted surveys aimed at specific dimensions of player-game interaction, while James' (2010) analysis of player preferences is mainly based on the examination of game sales data. Their studies employ top-down, deductive approaches towards the question of how player experience or player preferences change across cultures. While this has certainly the potential to provide useful insights into specific differences or similarities between players of digital games with different cultural backgrounds, a qualitative explorative approach is necessary to provide a more comprehensive, holistic, picture, to shape and direct further inquiries into this subject.

Bottom-up approaches, such as Zagal and Tomuro (2013) have employed, are needed to better understand, "[what] we talk about when we talk about games" (Ryan et al. 2015), and how this can change based on cultural background. However, quantitative studies utilizing NLP are still limited by the difficulties to accurately represent the nuanced way, users write about games, especially within the context of a cross-cultural comparison along language borders. As such, it is necessary to augment such approaches with qualitative or mixed-method studies, to first develop the necessary categories, which later can be validated in quantitative studies. By conducting such a study, this thesis therefore substantially adds towards the current research body on player-game interaction across cultural boundaries.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 An Ontology of Digital Games

To conduct a comparative analysis of the outcomes of player-game interaction, it is first necessary to examine what exactly it is, we are looking at, when we look at games and play. *Digital* games can be defined as games, that are mediated digitally, through an electronic device. Defining what a *game* is, proves more difficult. Wittgenstein famously uses the term as an example in his Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 1958, sections 65-67) where he demonstrates the difficulty of finding a single definition for all the disparate forms of games. Instead, he introduces the term "family resemblance", arguing that we judge whether a specific practice can be considered a game, based on its similarity and shared characteristics with other games (cf. Arjoranta 2014). Regardless, scholars have continuously put forth their own attempts to provide a comprehensive definition. McGonigal (2011, 21) contends that when "you strip away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation". For Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 80), a game is "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome". Both definitions draw on the late philosopher Bernard Suits (1967, 148; cf. Suits 2005), who poses that:

> To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity.

What we can glean from these definitions is that at the core of games, there are rules. These rules "provide the player with challenges that the player cannot trivially overcome" (Juul 2011, 5) and effectively limit the actions a player can possibly take, to achieve the goals of a game (McGonigal 2011, 21). Herein lies one main reason for the rise of *digital* games. Computers are better suited to enforce and facilitate rules in games than humans, making it possible to create more elaborate rules, while minimizing stress on players to remember and uphold them[7].

[7] There are however different ways and reasons for players to circumvent the enforcement of rules, such as through additions or alterations to the game through "mods" or by "cheating". For a more comprehensive picture, see Consalvo (2007).

While rules are certainly one core element of games, and might even be their defining trait, games are de-facto more than just a set of rules. Märyä (2008, 18) separates games into a “core” and “shell” (see Figure 6). The core corresponds to the inherent rules of a game, its logic and the way it is played, while the shell represents its audio-visual form and narrative elements. In chess, for example, the rules of the game (i.e. when and how pieces can be moved), do not change, even if a different “shell”, for example pieces and a board based on a popular movie franchise, are used.

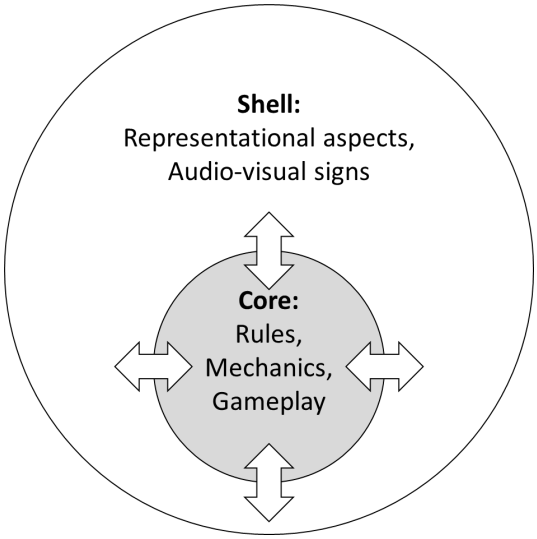


Figure 6 Schematic depiction of the "core" and "shell" elements of a game, based on Mäyrä 2008, 18

In his “elemental tetrad”, game designer Jesse Schell further differentiates four basic interrelated elements a game consists of: aesthetics, story, mechanics and technology (Schell 2008, 41-43). Aesthetics, refers to the audio-visual presentation of a game, story is defined as “the sequence of event that unfolds” (Schell 2008, 41) within the game, mechanics are “the procedures and rules” of a game, defining the goal, how players can achieve it and “what happens when they try” (Schell 2008, 41), while technology is “essentially the medium in which the aesthetics take place, in which the mechanics will occur, and through which the story will be told” (Schell 2008, 41-42). Schell argues that the aesthetics are the most visible element of a game to its users, while technology elements are generally least visible, with mechanics and story somewhere in between. When comparing Schell’s tetrad with Mäyrä’s core-shell schematic (see Figure 7), similarities and discrepancies become apparent. Schell’s aesthetic and story elements can be located at Mäyrä’s shell, while the mechanics are synonymous with the core. An element that Mäyrä does not explicitly account for is the technology, which provides the basis for the way aesthetic and mechanical elements are implemented within a game.

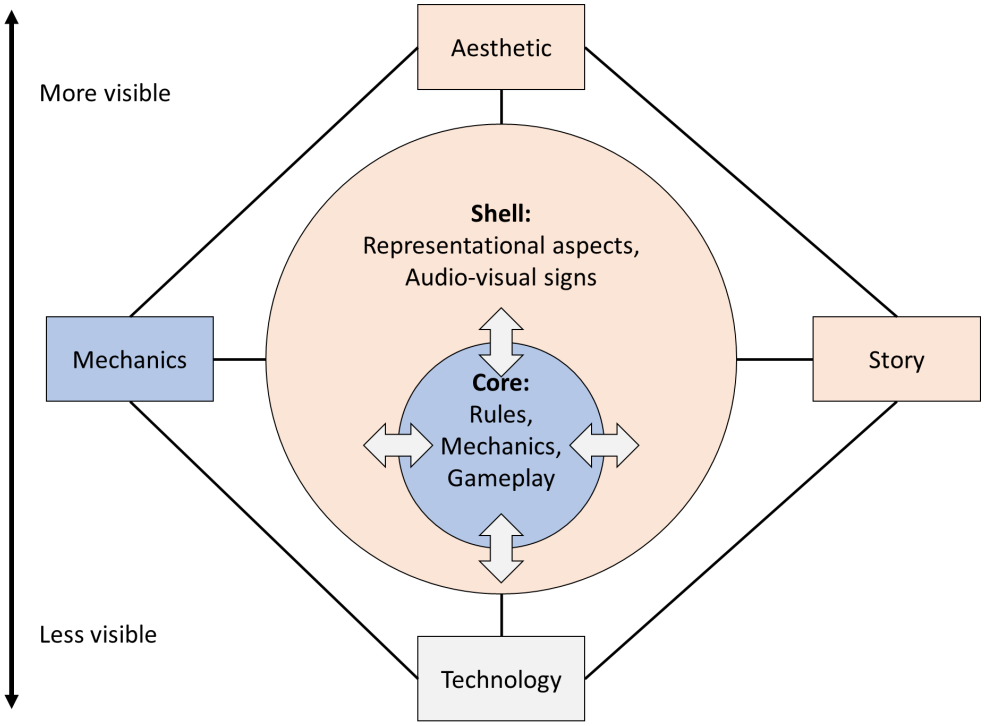


Figure 7 Combination of Mäyrä's model with Schell's elemental tetrad, based on Mäyrä 2008, 18 and Schell 2008, 41

The core of a game, its rules and mechanics are the defining trait of a game. Chess can be classified as chess, solely based on its rules. Digital game genres are colloquially demarcated in a similar fashion. For example, shooter games are characterized by a set of specific rules. Players control an in-game protagonist and usually engage in weaponized combat with non-player characters (NPC) or other players' avatars to proceed through the game, challenging their reflexes, speed, accuracy and spatial awareness. As long as a game adheres to this formula, it can be classified as a shooter no matter whether the game is set during World War II or in a science fiction setting. However, shell elements like visual presentation, can influence the way users interact with the game. For example, players might favor characters that they identify with or are fans of (Shibuya et al. 2019) and might change their playstyle based on such differences. The most common expression of such practices is colloquially referred to as role-playing. In some games, receiving rewards that change the visual appearance of the player's avatar can be one of the main motivations for players and shapes their actions within the game world. Core and shell elements are deeply interrelated. Games are systems of rules and mechanics that shape the way players can interact with them. The nature of this interaction on the micro-level (individual player-game interaction) and the macro-level (player cultures surrounding games), is however strongly influenced by aesthetic and story elements.

2.2 An Ontology of Player-Game Interaction

Games are interactive media[8]. The agency afforded players of digital games fundamentally differentiates them from other forms of entertainment media. It is the interaction of a player with a game[9], referred to as "play" or "gameplay", in which meaning making occurs (cf. Kirschner 2014). This interaction, by its nature, is a highly subjective process. The same game can (and will) be played, experienced, and evaluated in completely different ways by different players, albeit that their experiences are limited by the same inherent structure and affordances provided by the game (cf. Pinchbeck 2009).

In their literature review of research on player-game interaction, Caroux et al. (2015) observe that there currently is no clear definition of player-game interaction. Nevertheless, the way that different players interact with different games, has received much attention in games related research, leading for example to the creation of player typologies (e.g. Schuurman et al. 2008; Tondello et al. 2017; Tuunanen and Hamari 2012) and of conceptual frameworks to explain the way players interact with games, such as "player experience" or "playability" (Nacke et al. 2009; Nacke 2010; Olsen et al. 2011; Sánchez et al. 2009; Sánchez et al. 2012). Such models and typologies can serve frames to better understand the influence of contextual factors on player-game interaction and the resulting experiences.

One frequently used concept to illustrate one aspect of the relation between game and player is that of the "magic circle" (cf. Matsunaga 2019). In his book *Homo Ludens*, Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1955, 10) observes that:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. […] The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

[8] For a critical examination of this claim and the level of agency afforded to players in games, see Stang (2019)
[9] This thesis is primarily focused on player-game interaction in single player games. However, player-player interaction, not necessarily limited to multiplayer games, also contributes strongly towards meaning-making in games and shapes users experiences (cf. Kirschner 2014).

Salen and Zimmermann (2003, 95) later popularized the term "magic circle" in Rules of Play, arguing that in "a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins". To a certain extent, the world within the game, its rules and logic, are separated from the actual world we inhabit. This separation in certainly not complete, for example political, economic or legal concerns might permeate the "membrane" between the real and virtual world (Castronova 2008). The nature of such permeations, and therefore the nature of the magic circle and the resulting experiences is highly dependent on the social, legal, economic and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Consalvo (Consalvo 2009b, 408) touches upon this point in her critical examination of the concept of the magic circle, leading her to the conclusion that:

> [We] cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes.

Such contextual factors influence the experience of players on various levels, that are still not well understood. The permeability of the metaphorical magic circle, for instance is subject to the will of the player. Entering or creating a magic circle, as Salen and Zimmerman put it, is contingent upon the player's will to do so. Their intention and ability to enter the magic circle, that is the degree to which they accept the rules and game world offered by the game, are for example closely related towards notions of the suspension of disbelief (Brown 2012), the capacity for which differs between players and depends upon the game they play.

The fundamental elements directly involved in the player-game interaction are the player and the game system (i.e. the unit of game software and hardware). However, game system and player alike, exist within and are shaped by their own contexts that also influence the concrete nature and quality of their interaction (see Figure 5). On the player side, this context might for example include a player's preferences, affective state before and during play, his experiences with other related games, the environment in which he plays on the micro-level and broader societal, ideational and cultural trends on the macro-level. The contextual frame of a game is comprised of elements such as its developer, its business model, marketing strategies or the platform it is made for.

Player-game interaction occurs within such contextual frames. This also includes the concrete locality and purpose of play. For example, there is a difference in playing alone at home for

personal enjoyment, playing in an arena as part of an e-sports tournament and playing for an audience while streaming on a platform such as Twitch.tv. These differences are in part cognitive and psychological, that is they influence players' affective states (e.g. Kivikangas and Ravaja 2013; Nacke 2009; Nacke and Lindley 2010; Shaker et al. 2011; van Ommen 2018), motivations (e.g. Billieux et al. 2013; Melhart et al. 2019; Tychsen et al. 2008) and goals, and are in part grounded in the effect of spatial and social locality. In his "Defence of a Magic Circle", Stenros (2014) reframes the magic circle as a social contract and makes a further differentiation between three boundaries of play, "the 'protective frame' that surrounds a person in a playful state of mind (psychological bubble), the social contract that constitutes the action of playing (a game) (magic circle), and the spatial or temporal cultural site where (or a product around which) play is expected to happen (arena)" (Stenros 2014, 14).

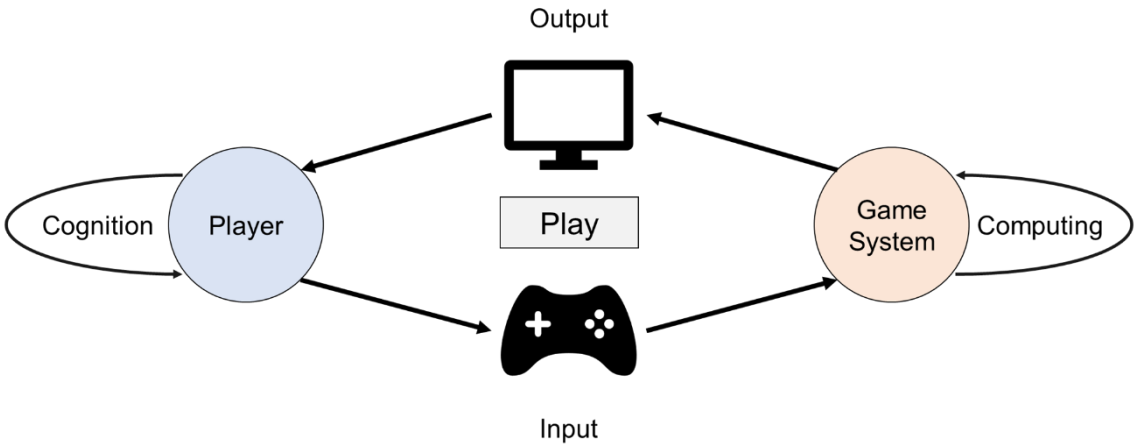


Figure 8 Play as an input/output relationship between player and game system

Play, the interaction of player and game, therefore occurs within a concrete spatial, temporal and socio-cultural context and is influenced by the players' psychological state. In digital games, interaction is mediated by a digital device, comprised of soft- and hardware. The interaction is both, a physical act through using an input device and receiving concrete outputs, and a mental one, through the act of meaning making, i.e. the interpretation of a game's outputs and the decision of which action to take, based on these outputs (see Figure 8).

The interaction between player and game system can result in a cognitive process of "shortening the subjective distance between player and game environment, often yielding a sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen" (Calleja 2011, 2). This phenomenon is usually referred to as "immersion" or, especially within the academic community, as "presence" (Wirth et al. 2007; Wissmath et al. 2009). Calleja (2011) further develops this notion in his book *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*, where he develops a model of

distinct forms and levels of player involvement with a game. He differentiates between macro-involvement, that is player involvement with a game outside of playing it, and micro-involvement, that is the actual involvement during play constituted by the dimensions of kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective and ludic involvement. These dimensions of involvement ranging "from conscious attention to internalized knowledge" (Calleja 2007, 88), can lead towards an experience of incorporation, a term, that Calleja argues is a better metaphor than "immersion" or "presence" to account "more satisfactorily for the complex range of factors that make up the sense of virtual environment habitation" (Calleja 2011, 5). He argues that incorporation "makes the game world present to the player while simultaneously placing a representation of the player within it through the avatar" (Calleja 2007, 88).

The kinesthetic dimension of player involvement relates to "all modes of avatar or game piece control in virtual environments" (Calleja 2011, 43). Spatial involvement "concerns players' engagement with the spatial qualities of a virtual environment" (Calleja 2011, 43). The shared involvement relates to the interaction of the player with human or computer-controlled agents in the game world. Narrative involvement "refers to engagement with story elements that have been written into a game as well as those that emerge from player's interaction with the game" (Calleja 2011, 43). Affective involvement "encompasses various forms of emotional engagement" (Calleja 2011, 44). Lastly, ludic involvement "expresses players' engagement with the choices made in the game and the repercussions of those choices" (Calleja 2011, 4)

The concrete nature of player game interaction or involvement, be it on the macro- or micro-level is, influenced by contextual frames including those linked to players' and games' cultural provenance. These frames influence how the output provided by the game system is perceived and interpreted by the player and how he reacts to this output. However, to examine the relationship between culture and play, it is necessary to first clarify how culture is understood within this thesis.

2.3 Players, Games and Culture

One central factor influencing the player experience of a specific game are the individual characteristics of the player, for instance whether he is more invested in the game's story elements or in the concrete challenges its mechanics provide. Based on previous work (Tondello et al. 2019; Tondello et al. 2017), Tondello and Nacke (2019) combine a dataset on

the preferences and scores of players on five dimensions of player characteristics, aesthetic, narrative, goal, social and challenge orientation, with a dataset on game characteristics, showing a high correlation between player traits and game preferences. Vahlo et al. (2017) differentiate player types into "mercenaries" (motivated by aggression), "adventurers" (motivation by exploration), "explorers" (motivated by coordination and exploration), "companions" (motivated by caretaking) "supervisors" (motivated by management) and "acrobats" (motivated by coordination) (cf. Tondello and Nacke 2019, 2).

Such player typologies highlight a central truth about players and games, their diversity. The diversity of players mirrors the diversity of games and is a central element of broader games culture. Players with similar preferences tend to play similar games. Often, they communicate with each other, directly or via intermediaries. This can lead to the formation of specific sub-cultures, as demarcated by similar behavior, values, or the development of a specific lingo, that contributes towards the formation of players' identities, in concern with broader patterns of socialization, norms, values and thought patterns.

Culture, in the area of game studies, is framed in various ways (Shaw 2010b). Often, however, it remains a vaguely used term. On a general level, culture within this thesis is defined as the "learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people" (Bennett 1998). Mäyrä (2008, 3) understands culture in concern to digital games as "a particular model of sense-making […] that is aimed to help distinguish the multiple layers and processes of meaning involved in playing and discussing them". In many instances, culture in concern to games refers to the emergent practices and values, shared by specific groups of game users (Mäyrä 2010), potentially leading to the formation of what can be colloquially referred to as a sub-culture. Such cultures can be identified on varying levels of granularity but on an epistemological level are the result of a differentiation to some form of constitutive other. For example, shared beliefs, values and behavior, as well as a shared use of specific lingo are evident among "gamers". However, while for example hardcore fans of role-playing games (RPG) and First-person shooter enthusiasts might both be part of a culture of gamers, they are also part of different sub-cultures, based on their genre preferences and resultant group identities. "Subculture" is here used as an inclusive term for a group of people within a larger culture, that exhibit a shared identity, values, practices and cultural objects, as well as a shared vocabulary that differentiates it form its parent culture (Haenfler 2013). The term is contentious and at least in English often used to refer to youth cultures resisting dominant societal values (Williams 2009). It has however also been increasingly used to describe the practices and

relationships of fans of specific media contents (Jenkins et al. 2018), and is therefore often closely linked to the term "fandom"[10].

Table 2 Levels of culture, based on Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018, with the definition for the target cultures within this thesis

Level	Culture Definition	Manifestation - Identification	Target
Macro	Overall/national culture of games, gamers and gameplay	Overall cultural identity	Regional/National
Meso	Cultures of multiple games or communities with unifying characteristics	Community or clan identity	Sub/transnational groups ("subcultures")
Micro	Cultures of a specific game or community	Personal Identity	Individual

Based on research into media cultures (Hepp 2009; Hepp and Couldry 2009), Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018, 82) define three levels of culture in concern to games. On the micro-level, they place cultures of a specific game or community. As an example, they mention the German FIFA culture or the culture surrounding the game EVE Online. On the meso-level they locate "cultures of multiple games or communities with a common unifying characteristic", for example "PS4 gamers" or "Nintendo gamers". On the macro-level they place the "overall culture of games, gamers and gameplay", defining it as global or national game cultures. They go on to develop a framework for the manifestations of contextual phenomena on these levels, differentiating, among other factors, between personal identity (micro), community or clan identity (meso), and overall cultural identity (macro). This differentiation between the individual or micro-level, the meso-level of player communities and overall or national (macro-level) cultural identity provides a framework to locate differences between player cultures on a transnational level as well. Differences in game cultures can be found on the (territorial) macro-level or on the subcultural meso- or micro-level, between players or communities of a specific game or a group of games. This thesis uses an adapted version of this model, by defining a target dimension of culture that consists of micro-level individuals, meso-level sub- or transnational groups of players (i.e. "subcultures) and the macro-level regional or national divide, in the case of this study the German-Japanese divide (see Table 2).

In the context of this thesis, a differentiation between the terms "gamer" and "player" becomes necessary. "Player" or "game user", within this thesis, are used as neutral terms, referring to

[10] For a critical discussion of the "fandom-as-community paradigm" see Robles Bastida (2019).

anyone who interacts with a game. “Gamer”, on the other hand, while used inconsistently in popular discourse, refers to individuals or groups that strongly engage in and identify with the activity of playing games and related behaviors. Distinctions are often made between “hardcore gamers” and “casual gamers”. Such labels are used by player communities and the games industry alike. The distinction between them appears ambivalent.

In their attempt to define “hardcore gamers”, Kapalo et al. (2015, 879) focus on the dimensions of time spent playing, the number of games owned and the frequency of purchasing new games. They operationalize the term “hardcore gamer” in the following way:

> Hardcore gamers played for 60 minutes or more in a single gaming session, played for two hours or more per day, played three or more days during the week, spent 15 minutes or more researching games, owned at least 20 games, and purchased at least two new titles within the past six months. If gamers did not meet at least five of these six criteria, they were then categorized as being a casual video gamer.

They decided against including the dimension of skill in their definition, as they argue that skill within one game does not necessarily transfer to other games or game genres. On the other hand, Manero et al. (2016) focus on the variables time and genre in their classification of gamers, concluding that hardcore gamers mostly play FPS or sport games. While such empirical classifications can prove fruitful in closer examining the allocation of player preferences, they do not necessarily reflect the way these terms are used in public discourse. Poels et al. (2012) provide a more comprehensive, but therefore also more ambiguous, definition of the terms hardcore and casual gamers. They qualitatively studied the parameters commonly used to define these labels through a series of focus group interviews, exploring six parameters: (1) time, (2) genre, (3) budget, (4) challenge, (5) competition and sociality, and (6) image, but also note difficulties in providing a clear definition based on these parameters. In practice, terms like “hardcore gamer” or “casual gamer” are often used by players to delineate their own, or others’ preferences and establish themselves as part of a certain sub-culture, in which their knowledge, skills and overall gaming behavior provide them with “gaming capital” (Consalvo 2007; cf. Walsh and Apperley 2008).

For Consalvo (2007, 3) sub-cultures “to be identified as such, must share common symbols, through such things as fashion, music or aesthetics”. However, as Mäyrä (2010) notes, this does not necessarily need to be the case as “the more invisible aspects of cultural bonds, including language, ritual and thought patterns” can be sufficient components to form sub-

cultural patterns. This understanding also confirms more closely to Bennett's (1998) notion of culture as "learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people". Gamer sub-cultures can therefore potentially also be fruitfully defined by players' genre preferences, which also closely interlinked with broader structures of media preference (Klevjer and Hovden 2017) and identities, such as gender, race or sexuality (Shaw 2010a, 2012). Within this thesis, the term sub-culture is used to refer to the meso-level of player cultures, that are located within, but often also transcend, macro cultural boundaries.

Another venue in which culture is discussed in concern to games, lies in the East-West dichotomy of games and players, touched upon in Section 1.1. The belief in differences between "East" (usually Japan)[11] and "West" (North America or Western Europe) and the resulting "binary perspective" (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 84) on the games industry, games, and players, is based on notions of a cultural peculiarity of Japanese players and games, their hard to define "Japaneseness". While this idea of Japaneseness has repeatedly been objected to scholarly scrutiny (e.g. Consalvo 2006, 2009a, 2016; Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015; de Pablos 2016), the concept appears deeply ingrained in Japanese and Western players alike, affecting their reception of Japanese games. As such, differences in the experience of digital games, grounded in cultural or contextual factors, are potentially most salient between Eastern and Western players, albeit they are influenced by players' sub-cultural identities.

Aside from the cultural background of players, the cultural provenance of games does concretely affect player-game interaction. Games are cultural artifacts, and as such the product of the basic assumptions and values of their creators (cf. Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014; Schein 1984). Although video game developers and publishers have in many cases become transnational corporations, targeting global audiences (Consalvo 2006, 2009a), the (national) cultural background of developers still influences the concrete form and contents of the games they produce in various ways, ranging from shell elements, such as setting, story or audio-visual style, to the inclusion, exclusion and concrete form of gameplay mechanics or even the development process itself (Consalvo 2016; Kanerva 2015).

[11] Because of the historically central role of Japanese games in the global market and their comparatively high visibility, academic discourse in the West strongly tends to focus on the dichotomy between Japan and North America and Europe (cf. Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 2018). Arguably, many labels used to frame Japanese games have however been extended towards South Korean or Chinese games, due to perceived similarities in design.

This is evident in various games from Japanese developers that, according to their credits, are often produced exclusively by Japanese personnel. For example, the "Game of the Year" nominee at The Game Awards 2017, Persona 5 (Atlus 2016), does not mention a single non-Japanese name in its core staff credits. A cursory glance at the game's extensive credits (Moby Games 2019) does not reveal any form of involvement of non-Japanese personnel aside from localization, English song lyrics, or voice acting for the English version. In fact, the game's authentic presentation of Japanese cultural elements, it being set in a fictionalized Tokyo, employing an Anime like graphic style and the core gameplay of a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG; cf. Pelletier-Gagnon 2018; Schules 2015; Schules et al. 2018), arguably contributed towards its success.

On the other hand, the "Japaneseness" of Japanese games has also been cited as a factor that potentially creates barriers for foreign (i.e. Western) players interacting with them (Byford 2014; Kanerva 2015). For Japanese game developers that target the global games market, this can create incentives to produce games that are largely free of such culturally specific signs and elements, and therefore "culturally odorless" (cf. Iwabuchi 2002). One strategy to do so has been the acquisition of Western developer studios (Consalvo 2016, 216-217). Japanese games are therefore located within conflicting narratives, in which their cultural provenance has been variously framed as an impediment towards their greater success that needs to be overcome, or as a significant contributor towards their popularity (Consalvo 2016).

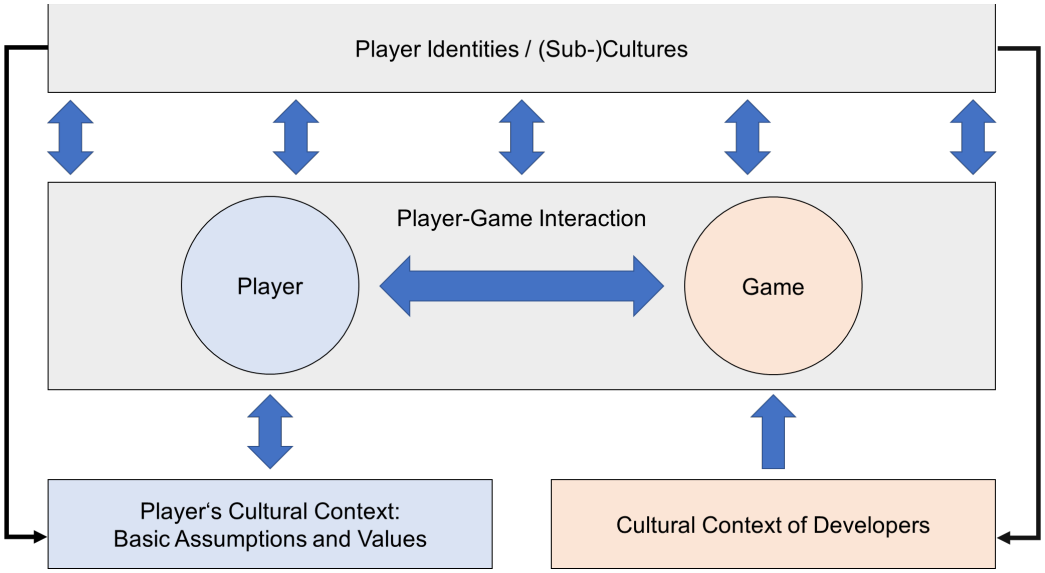


Figure 9 Relationship between different dimensions of culture and player-game interaction

In concern to player-game interaction, culture can thus be framed in two interrelated dimensions (see Figure 9). Meso-level player sub-cultures are constructed around specific

games or groups of games as the result of continuous player-game interactions of various players, interacting with each other directly or indirectly. In turn, the constructed cultural identities also influence interaction, through shaping or reinforcing patterns of game selection, preference and potentially playing style. Player-game interaction is however also shaped by larger (macro) cultural contexts, surrounding games and players. For players, this includes in particular their internalized values and identities and the sum of prior experiences with games and other media, while for games this is evident in their concrete contents, that are the product of the values and identities of their creators (Dwulecki 2017; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014).

2.4 Player Experience – Concept and Epistemological Framework

The interactions between player and game system, that is the loop of input and output, are part of a continuous process, requiring "nontrivial effort" (Aarseth 1997, 1) by the player. One way to conceptually frame the quality of the player game-interaction lies in the concept of "player experience" (PX). According to Wiemeyer et al. (2016, 246):

> [PX] denotes the individual and personal experience of playing games. Player experience describes the qualities of the player-game interactions and is typically investigated during and after the interaction with games.

They distinguish between three levels of player experience, (1) the (socio-)psychological level (or individual experience), (2) the behavioral level and (3) the physiological level but emphasize the central role of the (socio-)psychological level as the "constituent aspect of player experience" (Wiemeyer et al. 2016, 244).

Essentially, PX can be understood as a synonym to the term "game user experience" (e.g. Bernhaupt 2015). It does however hold some specific connotations. Game user experience and PX are direct extensions of the commonly used concept of User Experience (UX), which perhaps is conceptionally best developed in the field of HCI. UX is defined by the International Organization for Standardization in ISO 9241-210:2010 as a:

> person's perceptions and responses resulting from the use and/or anticipated use of a product, system or service […] User experience includes all the users' emotions, beliefs, preferences, perceptions, physical and psychological responses, behaviours and accomplishments that occur before, during and after use. […] User experience is a

> consequence of brand image, presentation, functionality, system performance, interactive behaviour and assistive capabilities of the interactive system, the user's internal and physical state resulting from prior experiences, attitudes, skills and personality, and the context of use.
>
> (International Organization for Standardization 2010)

This exceedingly broad definition of user experience is the starting point for current discussions in game studies and HCI on how to best adapt this concept towards the study of player-game interaction (Calvillo-Gámez et al. 2009; Nacke and Drachen 2011; Nacke et al. 2009; Wiemeyer et al. 2016). Similar to the change from usability research to user experience research, the trend in game user research runs towards exploring the emotional and affective aspects of user experience, that is from the game-centric idea of *playability* or *game experience* (Nacke et al. 2009; Nacke 2010; Sánchez et al. 2009; Sánchez et al. 2012) towards the user-centric idea of PX (Wiemeyer et al. 2016, 245-246).

The concrete definition of PX differs slightly between researchers. Ermi and Mäyrä (2007, 37) describe PX as "an ensemble made up of the player's sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions, and meaning-making in a gameplay setting." Gerling et al. (2011, 84) understand PX as derived from UX, and as a concept to "[describe] how a person perceives and responds to the interaction with a system", while Lazarro (2008) contends that the fundamental difference between *play* and *use* also causes fundamental differences between PX and UX, the former in the case of games is related to usability, while the latter concentrates on the concept of "fun" (cf. Wiemeyer et al. 2016, 246). While not inconsequential, the importance of "usability" in game related contexts is comparatively lower than in, for instance, utility software (Nacke and Drachen 2011). Games can for example be engaging or fun, even if their usability is low (Calvillo-Gámez et al. 2009; McAllister and White 2015; Nagalingam and Ibrahim 2015).

Japanese sociologist Haruhiro Katō (2001, 159-160) identifies three dimensions through which the "fun" of playing can be grasped, (1) interaction with the display, (2) interaction with a game's story and (3) the interrelation with the information culture in the broader media sphere, especially the (Japanese) "media mix" (cf. Ōtsuka 2014; Steinberg 2012). Kagimoto (2018) rephrases these dimensions into three constitutive elements of the gameplay experience, *sōsasei* (operability, usability), *monogatarisei* (story) and *kyōyūsei* (shareability). In their "framework of player experience", Nacke and Drachen (2011, 5) somewhat similarly differentiate three interrelated layers of PX (see Figure 10) understanding it as part of a

temporal progression. The first layer is the "very concretely graspable and technical game system experience", the second is "the experience that influences and is influenced by the perceptive and operational actions of the player", while the third is the "abstract experience levels […] shaped by interactions with other players, games technologies, etc. (i.e., the context) in a certain segment of time". This provides insights into what shapes PX. Contextual factors, such as the cultural factors explored in this thesis, influence the concrete individual experience of a game as they are an interrelated part of overall PX. At the same time, PX is however also dependent on a player's preferences, affective state, and other highly individual factors.

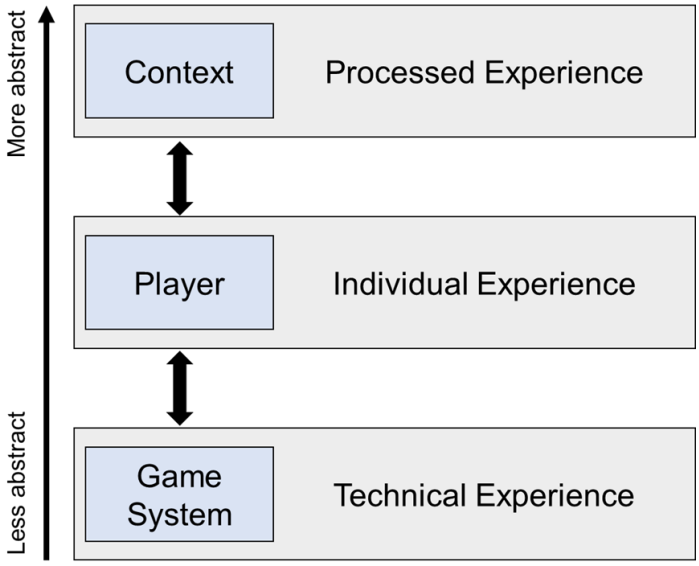


Figure 10 Three layers of PX, based on Nacke and Drachen (2011, 5-6)

The elements of these layers are subjected to changes over time, for example, the game system can be updated, player perceptions might shift and the surrounding context can change based on socio-economic, political or cultural changes (Nacke and Drachen 2011, 5-6). The temporal dimension is also intricately linked with the epistemological understanding of PX. In their conceptual examination of UX, Marti and Iacono (2016) differentiate between four stages of UX, based on work by Roto et al. (2011), anticipated, momentary, episodic and remembered (or cumulative) UX (see Table 3). These progressive stages can be used to frame player experience as well and are strongly interrelated. For instance, anticipated UX/PX, such as high expectations towards a game, can influence the actual momentary UX/PX in positive or negative ways and affect the way a player reflects on the game after play. At the same time, this differentiation also poses epistemological implications. Marti and Iacono themselves briefly outline different methodologies for different stages of UX, which also fits Howell and Stevens' (2019) epistemological "game space model" that differentiates between "games as

anticipated", "games as played", and "games as recalled" as part of the interaction space between player and game.

Table 3 Stages of UX, based on Marti and Iacono (2016, 1647)

What	When	How
Anticipated UX	Before Usage	Imagining experience
Momentary UX	During Usage	Experiencing
Episodic UX	After Usage	Reflecting on experience
Remembered/Cumulative UX	Over time	Recollecting multiple periods of use

Player experience, as mentioned above, denotes the quality of player-game interactions. Various psychological models have been created to operationalize this quality. In their summary of existing models (e.g. Calvillo-Gámez et al. 2015; Desurvire and Wiberg 2009; IJsselsteijn et al. 2008), Wiemeyer et al. (2016, 252) identify the following elements of player experience:

- Competence
- Autonomy and control
- Immersion, (spatial and social) presence, flow, and GameFlow
- Involvement and (enduring) engagement
- Social relatedness and social interaction
- Challenge
- Tension
- Curiosity
- Fantasy
- Positive and negative emotions
- Intrinsic goals
- Feedback and evaluation

However, they further note the complex interactions between these elements and the difficulties in separating them (Wiemeyer et al. 2016, 253), making them useful concepts to better understand and frame the experiences of digital game players in certain dimensions, but also insufficient to holistically describe player's experiences. As the goal of this thesis lies in comparing German and Japanese players' PX in concern to the same games, or at least to the

localized version, an inductive, bottom-up approach and a rich (qualitative) data set to counter the drawbacks of deductive approaches (cf. Calvillo-Gámez et al. 2015) are necessary.

Attemtps to analyze PX are however faced with epistemological challenges. PX is inherently intrinsic. Espeacially the measurement of the (socio-)psychological dimension of PX is therefore normally dependent upon some form of self-report, with varying levels of data quality. Furthermore, PX is also part of, a larger interrelated and dynamic system of media or game use (see Figure 11).

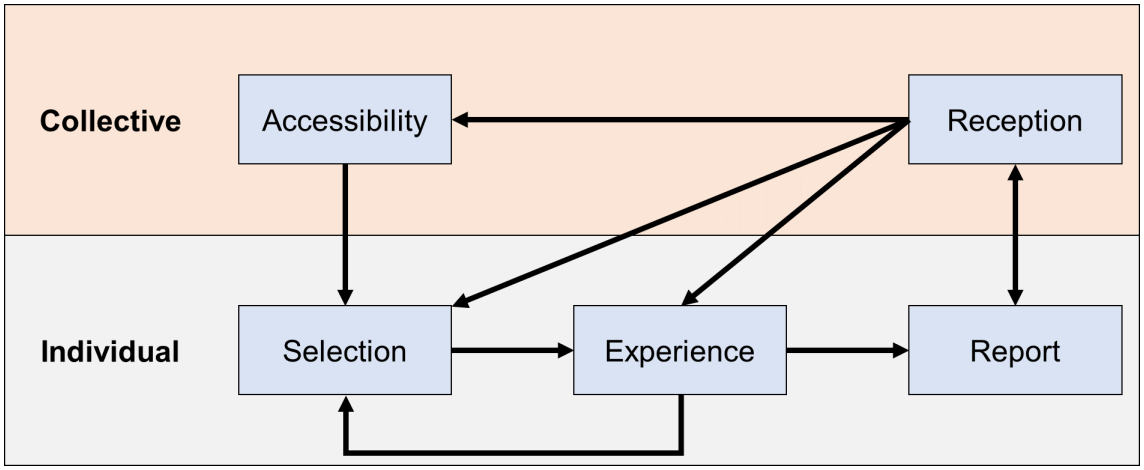


Figure 11 Process of (individual) game selection, experience and report, and relation to macro-level reception and accessibility, with arrows denoting possible influence

On a simplified level, this system consists of the following elements:

- *Accessibility* is the sum of necessary prerequisites to allow a player to select a specific game. A game is more easily accessible, if it is available in a player's home market, localized for the market (to varying degrees), visible to the player (e.g. through marketing), compatible with a player's hardware, and low-priced (cf. Porter and Kientz 2013).
- *Selection* is the process of deciding on, procuring and starting to interact with a game. Selection is limited by accessibility and dependent upon player preferences and prior experiences. Whether a player will play a specific game or not is decided, based on a trade-off between the cost aspects of accessibility and the expected gratifications of playing a game, that is in turn also influenced by the general reception of a game[12].

[12] For an overview of media psychological aspects and concepts related to the selection of games, see Reinecke and Klein (2015).

- *Experience* denotes the actual PX as described in the previous section. It is a direct intrinsic outcome of player-game interaction and player cognition, shaped by a player's preferences, affective state and prior experiences. Experience of a game can influence a player's selection process for subsequently played games. For instance, a positive experience of playing one game might lead to the player buying other entries into its franchise, other games by the same developer or other games of the same genre.
- *Report* here refers to the expressed experience (verbally or written) of playing a game, that is the "game as reported" (Howell and Stevens 2019, 3). This is usually based on episodic and remembered PX, the "game as recalled" (Howell and Stevens 2019, 3). Evaluations of a game can, for example, be expressed in private conversation, on a steaming platform or written in a review. These reports are the main source of data available to examine a player's inherently intrinsic PX.
- A game's *reception* is based on the sum of openly stated reports by players (including professional critics) and represents the overall discourse in concern to a specific game. A game's reception can influence its accessibility in various ways, for example by making it more visible in the market or by providing developers with incentives to produce similar games or market the games in more regions, potentially with a more extensive localization. A game's general reception also influences player selection and the concrete experience of a game, by shaping player expectations of it. Lastly, while overall reception on the collective level is generally formed through the sum of individual reports, existing reception also influences the form and content of reports.

While this thesis aims to examine and compare German and Japanese players' experiences, it too is limited to the use of self-reported data provided by players either through user reviews, or more directly during play in the form of think-aloud protocols. As the model above shows however, micro-level PX and the resulting reports are a key factor in the overall economy of play and therefore warrant closer examination.

2.5 Digital Games and Localization

A last factor that needs to be addressed in the context of a cross-cultural analysis of player experience is the question of how practices of localization influence PX. The games market is highly globalized, leading to a constant flow of games across regional and linguistic borders. Localization is the process of "taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally

appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold" (Esselink 2000, 3). Localization can alter various elements of a digital game (see Table 4), potentially leading to fundamental changes and discrepancies between versions of the same game, released in different locales.

Table 4 Possible dimensions of digital game localization

What	How
Text/Story/Narrative	Translation; interpretation; alteration of meaning
Audio-Visual	Voice actors for target language; changes to music or sound effects; visual alterations of game content, changes to the user interface
Gameplay	Changes to gameplay mechanics, e.g. to difficulty settings; inclusion or exclusion of new systems or features, for example fast travel
Hardware/Platform	Release on a different platform; changes to the game's jacket, manual or goods
Marketing	Changes to or availability of accompanying material and marketing strategies.

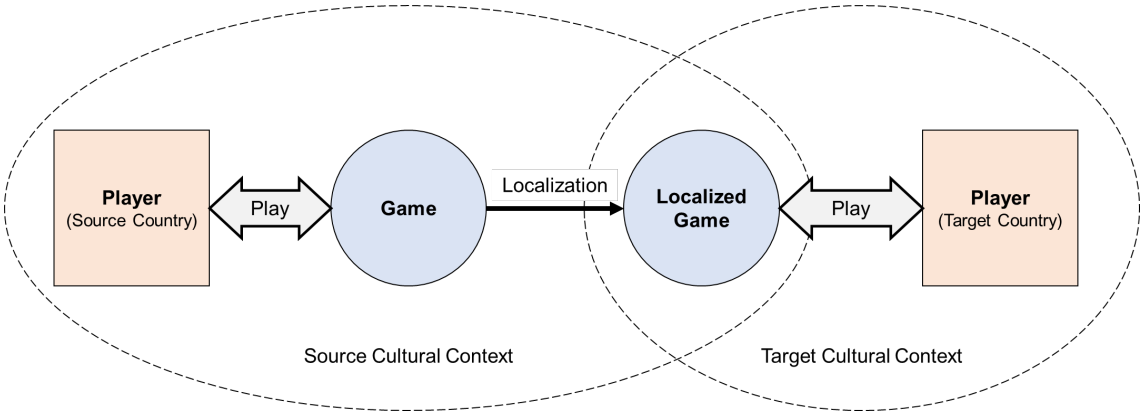


Figure 12 Model of the player-game interaction of the original and localized game within their respective cultural contexts

Localization effectively alters the original game, to become more easily accessible by players of a target cultural (and legal) context (see Figure 12). This can include altering or censoring potentially offending content related to violence, sexuality, or political symbols. For example, publishers of games set during World War II often make changes to their products to confirm to German laws, prohibiting the display of symbols related to Nazism. The Western release of the game Yakuza 3 (Amusement Vision 2009), famously excluded a mini-game set in a hostess

bar (Wen 2018) so as not to offend Western sensibilities. While this was strongly criticized by Western players of the series, it does conform to the patterns of "managing Japaneseness", outlined in Section 2.3.

In practice however, localization in most games is most apparent in the game's translation (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Pedersen 2015; Thayer and Kolko 2004). While translation can have a great impact on the way a game is experienced and evaluated (e.g. Schules 2012; Vázquez-Rodríguez 2016) it normally does not change the overall plot of a game. Changes to a game's mechanics are also rare. As such, although German and Japanese players, strictly speaking, do not play the same games, but different versions of it, differences are largely limited to the shell elements of a game, especially its overall text, dialogue and the selection of voice actors.

To effectively compare the experiences of German and Japanese players, it is necessary to account for changes between the original and localized version of a game. To do so, the author played the German and Japanese versions of all games selected in this study, while paying attention towards the possible changes (see Table 4) made as part of the localization process. Changes that appear related towards the results of this study are mentioned in the presentation and discussion of results, where appropriate.

3 Method

3.1 Methodological Framework

The main empirical contribution of this thesis lies in a computer assisted qualitative data analysis of German and Japanese user reviews and think-aloud protocols (cf. Tan et al. 2014), to examine differences and similarities in player experience between German and Japanese players of the same (or localized) games. The TAPs are the result of a series of recorded play sessions with nine German and eleven Japanese players. The data is analyzed based on a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strübing 2014), aided by the qualitative software analysis software MAXQDA to facilitate easier data analysis and visualization.

Methods to investigate PX are generally targeted at one of its three constituent dimensions: (socio-)psychological, behavioral, or physiological. As elaborated and discussed in 2.4, the (socio-)psychological, or individual, experience is the focus of this thesis, as this is where meaning making does actively (and measurably) occur. Common methods of studying this dimension of PX include the use of psychological or player models, surveys and questionnaires, verbal reports, interviews and thinking aloud (Wiemeyer et al. 2016, 259). In general, all of these are forms of self-reported evaluations. As the goal of this thesis lies in clarifying the influence of players' cultural backgrounds on PX, a bottom-up, inductive approach is necessary to provide a holistic view that is not limited to the examination of existing theoretical concepts that constitute PX. To facilitate such an inductive approach, the two sources of data gathered and analyzed in this study, user reviews and TAPs, were chosen.

Table 5 Pros and cons of the utilized sources of data

	User Reviews	**Think-aloud Protocols**
Pros	- High quantity - Easily accessible - Depicts individual experience after purchase decision	- High quality - Recorded during play - Follow-up interviews possible - Account for participants' attributes
Cons	- Written after play (memory bias) - Mixed quality - Possibility of fake reviews - Reviewers attributes unknown	- Time- and cost-intensive - Limited number - Laboratory setting

Due to the epistemological challenges described in Section 2.6, any methodological approach to examine PX is the result of a series of trade-offs (see Table 5). This also holds true for both sources used within the scope of this project. User reviews are easily accessible and available in large quantities. Coupled with their comparatively high quality in regard to text structure, length and clarity, this has led to them becoming a commonly used source of data for user research (e.g. Bounie et al. 2008; Hedegaard and Simonsen 2013; Ivory 2006; Stråat and Verhagen 2017; Zhu and Fang 2014). There are however significant potential drawbacks. They are written after the actual use of a product, with varying timespans between use and review. They are thus subjected to cognitive filtering processes and memory bias, reflecting episodic and remembered player experience. User reviews are also of mixed quality and potentially face the problem of the inclusion of fake reviews.

Think aloud protocols, on the other hand, are recorded during play and therefore more closely reflect players' momentary experience. The gathered data is hence less influenced by memory biases. Another advantage of TAP is the direct contact between researcher and participants, making it possible to pose follow-up questions or conduct interviews. The main obstacle of TAP lies in the high amount of time and effort required to gather and prepare data, usually resulting in a limited number of participants. There are also variations in how easily participants adapt to TAP, and the influence of the lab setting, under which the data is usually gathered (see Section 3.5). Within the scope of this exploratory study, user reviews and TAP complement each other by at least partially covering their shortcomings. While user reviews are available in high quantities but are basically reports on episodic and remembered player experience, TAPs are more limited in number but provide high quality data gathered during play, reflecting the players' momentary PX.

Figure 13 depicts, the overall methodological design of this study, drawing on the theoretical concepts developed in Chapter 2. The empirical objective of this study lies in a comparative analysis of German and Japanese PX on the socio-psychological level in concern to the same, respectively localized, game. PX is the result of the interaction between player and game system, within their respective contexts. To compare German and Japanese players PX, a two-fold approach of analyzing user reviews and think-aloud protocols is used, to facilitate a holistic analysis, minimizing the drawbacks of each data source.

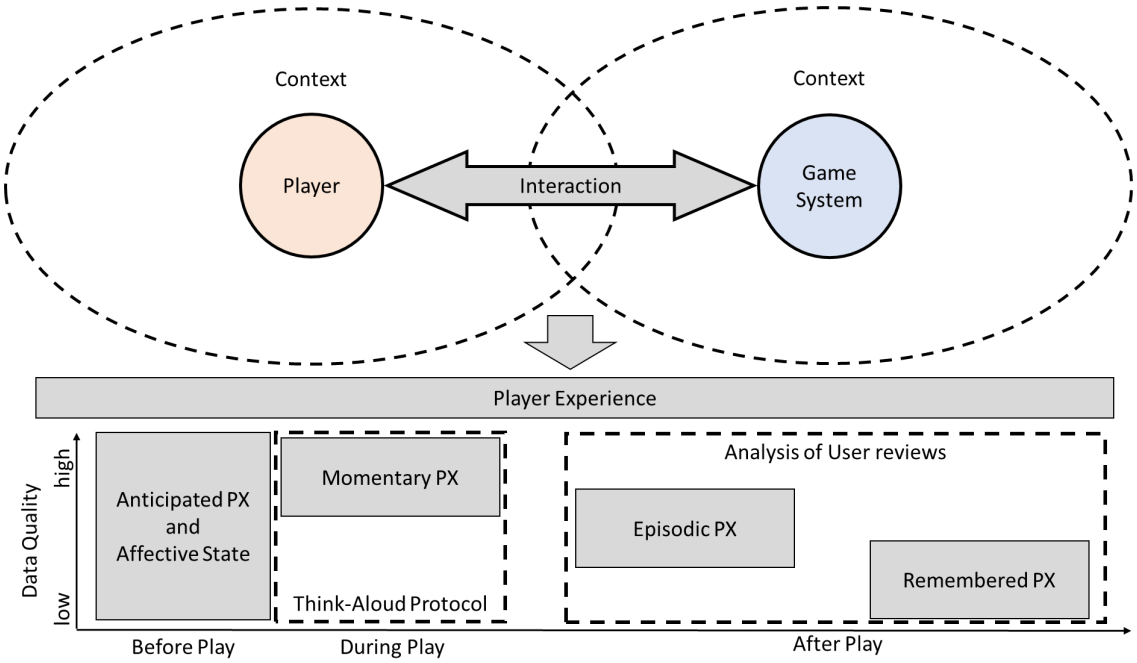


Figure 13 Overview of the methodological design of the study, the methods used and their relation to PX. High data quality refers to a lesser influence of memory biases, while lower data quality refers to a higher influence.

User reviews were drawn from the German (https://www.amazon.de/) and Japanese (https://www.amazon.co.jp/) Amazon stores (see Section 3.4), as this makes it possible to focus on reviews that are written on structurally identical platforms. User reviews on Amazon are usually written by people that purchased and played a game. They are functionally similar to professional reviews in that they are meant to be an outlet for sharing a user's experiences with a product. An examination of other sources, such as user comments on game websites, online forums, social networks, or streaming platforms such as YouTube or Twitch, highlights their comparatively high quality. They are on average more extensive, better structured, well-reasoned and more reflective than other forms of user self-reports available online (Brückner et al. 2019).

The choice of focusing on Amazon reviews for this part of the empirical analysis is the result of an examination of other potential sources. First, the decision was made to focus exclusively on user reviews for this thesis. In a prior publication (Brückner et al. 2019), professional reviews by game journalists were included in the analysis. While such reviews are potentially more influential on popular discourses (i.e. reception) on games, they are fundamentally similar to user reviews in that they present the reported experience of a game by a (usually) single

player[13]. However, their main purpose is the analysis of a game, in order to provide readers with the necessary knowledge to make an informed decision on whether to buy it or not[14]. The standards and incentives for reviewing a game can differ greatly between game critics and journalists on the one side and the average user on the other side. Professional standards and practices also somewhat limit the breath of opinion in professional reviews, when compared to user reviews (Brückner et al. 2019). In general, user reviews as a source of data arguably represent the experiences of a broader range of players, are less constrained by professional standards and practices, and depict a broader spectrum of opinions than professional reviews[15]. In some regards, user reviews even tend to provide contextually richer information than professional reviews. In their analysis of professional game reviews, Zagal et al. (2009) describe nine themes present, and one "missing" theme not commonly present in game reviews. Professional game reviews usually contain descriptions of the reviewed game, the reviewer's personal experience as a player, reader advice, suggestions for improvement, media context, game context, technology, design hypotheses on the intent of the developer and comments on the state of the industry. They usually are missing information on how (e.g. for how long, with or without the use of external resources,) the reviewer played a game. As is shown in Chapter 4, user reviews often contain all these dimensions, including the missing contextualization of the way the game was played.

The choice of the German and Japanese Amazon stores as source for the user reviews is also based on practical reasons. First, both websites function similarly in terms of purpose and enable the writing of user reviews under the same set of conditions, thereby heightening their comparability. Second, the match between platform and geographical and linguistic boundaries makes it easier to demarcate the user reviews in terms of the intended target population for a comparative analysis. This is an advantage over, for example user reviews from the PC gaming platform Steam, where the unbound nature of the platform can lead, for instance, to many German players writing reviews in English. Coupled with Amazon's arguably strong position

[13] While professional reviews are predominantly written by single authors, there are also cases of multi-author reviews, especially for highly popular game titles.
[14] For a more extensive critical discussion of game journalism, see Carlson (2009), Nieborg and Foxman (Nieborg and Foxman 2016), and Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009).
[15] One question not covered within the scope of this thesis lies in the relation between professional and user reviews. Arguably, many writers of user reviews model their reviews to some extent on professional reviews in concern to stylistic choices and structure. The content of user reviews also potentially reflects larger discourses on the reviewed game, of which professional reviews are a focal part. This appears as a potentially rich field for further study.

in the market for console games, this leads to a comparatively high number of game user reviews on Amazon.

Table 6 Relation between players represented in the user reviews and think-aloud protocols on the macro-, meso-, and micro-level

Level	User Reviews	Think-Aloud Protocols
Macro (National)	German/Japanese Players of Digital Games	
Meso (Groups)	Players of the selected games with various uncontrolled meso-level cultures represented	Controlled characteristics of participants
Micro (Individuals)	Individual Player/Reviewer	

Overall, the combination of user reviews and think aloud protocols is highly synergetic as it enables the triangulation of results and accounts for the different forms of bias present in the sources. User reviews are available in high quantity, but knowledge of the reviewers that write them is largely limited to what is disclosed in the reviews. Participants in the TAPs can however be selected based on theoretical considerations (see Table 6), for example their playing habits, media consumption or sub-cultural identity. It is therefore possible to identify biases present in the user reviews based on the strong representation of specific meso-level cultures by contrasting the results of the analysis of user reviews with the analysis of TAPs. Furthermore, as described above, the inclusion of TAPs also serves to limit the influence of memory biases present in the user reviews, by including a source on the momentary experience of players.

3.2 Selection of Games and Target Cultures

The qualitative approach followed in this thesis makes it necessary to carefully select the sample of digital games represented here. Towards this end, a combination of a most-similar and most-different case design was chosen, to heighten the quality of the conclusions drawn from the analysis. First, the choice of comparing German and Japanese players is based on an approximation of a most-different case design (Bennett 2004). As elaborated on in Section 2.3, this is grounded in the idea of potential differences between players being most salient between

Japan and the West, thereby potentially providing the highest variety of differences for this explorative study.

Germany is the second largest market for games in the West, after the United States (Newzoo 2019). Choosing German players as the second target for comparison provides two advantages. First, it circumvents the problem of having to draw data from the globally accessed US Amazon store, where reviewers from outside the US frequently write product reviews in English. The German Amazon store, in contrast, enables a higher match between intended target population and the collected sample. Second, Germany does not have a strong domestic games industry. As such, foreign content, and Japanese games in particular, are not only available, but highly popular and arguably a regular part of German players' media environments (game 2019).

The choice to focus solely on Japanese games in this study is closely related to this. Japanese games are available and popular in both countries, ensuring equivalence. This is a prerequisite for effective comparison (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017, 8). Furthermore, Japanese games are the only class of games where previous research (e.g. Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 2018; Schules 2015) accounts for the cultural elements represented in them. This makes it possible to select games with differing degrees and forms of "Japaneseness" (see Section 2.3) to observe how the cultural context of the game influences player-game interaction.

While the most different case design of the targeted groups of players is meant to maximize the salience of potential differences in PX, the selection of games for this study is aimed at providing a rich, but narrow sample of games, comparable to a most-similar case design. The underlying reason for this is the attempt to approximate an *et ceteris paribus* argument, that is to use games that appear similar in many variables, so that differences are more easily attributable to specific (i.e. the divergent) aspects of a game.

In accordance with the arguments outlined above, a comparatively narrow sub-set of the greater "family" (Wittgenstein and Schulte 2001, 66) of games was chosen. The selected games (see Table 7) showcase the variety of Japanese games within the above-mentioned constraints of a most similar case design. All games selected for this study have been developed by a Japanese developer, with a dominantly Japanese staff as indicated in the games' credits and were released between 2013 and 2019 in Japan and Germany. As the influence of cultural context on PX arguably extends to a game's shell elements, the focus is put on single-player offline experiences with complex narrative structures, that is games with stories.

Table 7 Overview of the games included in this study, with the platform version used in brackets. Games highlighted by color were used in the TAP sessions

Title and Platform	Abbrev.	Published (JP)	Published (DE)	Developer	Publisher
Devil May Cry 5 (PS4)	DMC5	2019	2019	Capcom	Capcom
Dragon Quest XI (PS4)	DQ11	2017	2018	Square Enix	Square Enix
Dragons Dogma: Dark Arisen (PS4)	DD	2017	2017	Capcom	Capcom
Final Fantasy XV (PS4)	FF15	2016	2016	Square Enix	Square Enix
Judgement (PS4)	JUD	2018	2019	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios	Sega
Kingdom Hearts III (PS4)	KH3	2019	2019	Square Enix Business Division 3	Square Enix
Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (PS4)	NK2	2018	2018	Level-5	Level-5 (JP) / Bandai Namco Entertainment (DE)
Nier: Automata (PS4)	NA	2017	2017	Platinum Games	Square Enix
Octopath Traveller (Switch)	OCT	2018	2018	Square Enix Business Division 11/Aquire	Square Enix
Persona 5 (PS4)	P5	2016	2017	P-Studio	Atlus (JP) / Deep Silver (DE)
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (PS4)	RE7	2017	2017	Capcom	Capcom
Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (PS4)	Sek	2019	2019	From Software	From Software (JP) / Activision (DE)
Shining Resonance Refrain (PS4)	SRR	2018	2018	O-Two	Sega
Tales of Berseria (PS4)	ToB	2016	2017	Bandai Namco Studios	Bandai Namco Entertainment
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel (PS3/PS4)	ToCS1	2013/2018	2016/2019	Nihon Falcom	Nihon Falcom (JP) / NIS America, Marvelous Europe (DE)
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II (PS3/PS4)	ToCS2	2014/2018	2016/2019	Nihon Falcom	Nihon Falcom (JP) / NIS America (DE)
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Switch)	ZBotW	2017	2017	Nintendo EPD	Nintendo
Yakuza 0 (PS4)	Yak0	2015	2017	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio	Sega

To minimize differences in target populations, while at the same time, accounting for different levels of culture, the sample is limited to the genres of (J)RPGs and Action/Adventure games[16], with similar target demographics, but differing market penetrations especially in Germany. Japanese games such as Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix 2016) or Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (Capcom 2017b) are part of the German mainstream and played by a (culturally) broad range of players, that reflect German macro-level player culture. On the other hand, games such as The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel (ToCS; Nihon Falcom 2013/2016) are not part of the mainstream and regarded as more niche titles. Accordingly, German user reviews are less numerous and reflect the experiences of micro- or meso-level player cultures (Brückner et al. 2019).

The game sample was selected in three steps. The first step of the analysis included the games Persona 5 and ToCS1 and 2 (Nihon Falcom 2014/2016), chosen because of their strong similarities in respect to mechanics and, to a lesser degree, visual design and narrative elements. These similarities make them an ideal objective for a most-similar case study[17]. In the next step, more games were added, to account for a broader set of variables and player cultures within this narrow set of Japanese games. Variables accounted for include for example the games' visual design, mechanic elements like the combat system or the degree of freedom/linearity, the incorporation into broader franchises and the degree of "Japaneseness" (see Section 2.3). The sample was originally limited to games developed for the PlayStation 4 (PS4), to ensure that the similarity also extended towards the platform, as a game's platform is closely linked to PX (being a constituent part of the games system) but also because different platforms tend to attract different player groups. However, the Nintendo Switch games Octopath Traveler (Square Enix Business Division 11 and Aquire 2018) and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo EPD 2017), together with the game Shining Resonance Refrain (O-Two 2018) were included for analysis in a third step, as they were used to further explore selected topics that emerged during data analysis, related towards nostalgia on games, the degree of freedom attributed to the player, and the depiction of female characters.

Although all games were originally developed for a console platform (PS4 or Switch), several of them have later been released on PC in an effort to reach a wider audience in the West. All games chosen were generally reviewed favorably by game critics and users alike, to exclude

[16] For a discussion and critical examination of game genres, see Apperley (2006).
[17] The results of this analysis are detailed in Brückner et al. 2019.

objectively flawed games. This decision was made, based on the games' Metacritic (https://www.metacritic.com/), meta scores being higher than 75, denoting "generally favorable reviews" (see Table 8). One exception was made for the game Shining Resonance Refrain, with a meta score of 67, as it presents an ideal addition to the most-similar case design, because of its adherence to standard gameplay mechanics, but also presents some unique stimuli in concern to its setting, characters and art style, such as the depiction of highly sexualized female characters, that appeared as a salient topic during data analysis.

Table 8 Overview of the score of the selected games on the Japanese and German Amazon stores (maximum: 5) and the Metacritic (https://www.metacritic.com/) meta (maximum: 100) and user (maximum 10) scores, as of December 12, 2019. The Metacritic Metascore is aggregated from reviews by professional game critics, the Userscore is based on user reviews.

	Amazon Score (JP)	**Amazon Score (DE)**	**Metacritic (Metascore)**	**Metacritic (Userscore)**
DD	4.4	4.3	78	8.1
DMC5	4.3	4.5	88	8.4
DQ11	4.3	4.6	86	8.7
FF15	3.3	4.5	81	7.6
JUD	4.5	4.7	80	8.4
KH3	3.6	4.5	83	8.1
NA	4.4	4.5	88	8.9
NK2	3.7	4.4	84	7.5
Oct	4.2	4.4	83	8.6
P5	4.8	4.7	93	8.7
RE7	4.7	4.5	88	7.9
Sek	4.3	4.3	90	7.9
SRR	3.3	3.9	67	6.9
ToB	4.1	4.4	79	7.0
ToCS1	4.2	4.6	80	8.6
ToCS2	4.1	4.7	78	8.3
YAK0	4.5	4.4	85	8.4
ZBotW	4.7	4.8	97	8.6

The games selected for the TAP sessions (highlighted by color in Table 7) are the PlayStation 4 versions of: Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (Level-5 2018), Kingdom Hearts III (Square

Enix Business Division 3 2019), Tales of Berseria (Bandai Namco Studios 2017) and Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen (Capcom 2017a). The first three are commonly classified as Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), arguably one of the most iconic genres of Japanese games in the global market (Schules 2015), while Dragon's Dogma is a Japanese RPG with Western design influences. They feature similarities in their basic gameplay elements, such as a real-time battle-system, although the concrete implementation differs.

Ni no Kuni II's artwork is inspired, and partially created, by Studio Ghibli, which is frequently mentioned in German reviews of the game (e.g. Bischoff 2018). The game's Japanese origin is strongly emphasized in German review articles. On the other hand, Kingdom Hearts III is part of the Kingdom Hearts series of games, combining characters and worlds from various Disney franchises with JRPG elements. In contrast to these two games, Tales of Berseria and Dragons's Dogma have no close ties to existing trans-media franchises. Tales of Berseria is the newest entry into the long running "Tales of" series of digital games, beginning with the 1995 release of Tales of Phantasia (Namco Tales Studio 1995). It employs a visual design typical of Japanese manga and anime. It is a representative of traditional JRPGs and received and marketed as such in Germany. Dragon's Dogma incorporates various elements popular in Western games, such as an open-world design and a more photorealistic graphic style. All games are critically acclaimed and well-received by German and Japanese users, as evident in user reviews on the German and Japanese Amazon stores (see Table 8). As it is preferable that the games for the TAP sessions have not been played by participants before, to capture their unfiltered first impressions, aside from these theoretical considerations the four games were also chosen on the practical consideration of the fewest participants having prior experience with these concrete titles.

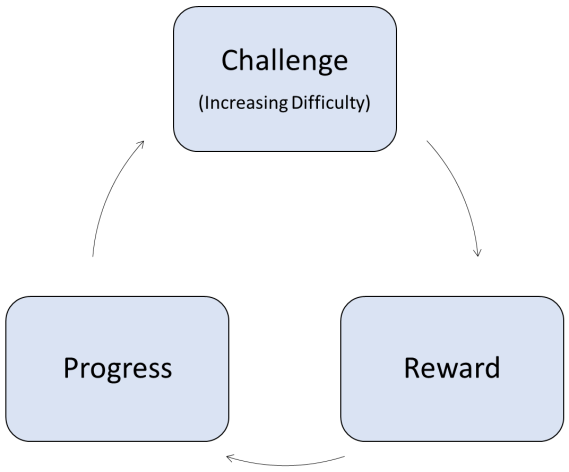


Figure 14 Basic gameplay loop of challenge, reward and progress

A comprehensive overview of all selected games is outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, their characteristics will be detailed as necessary, to contextualize the results detailed and discussed in the next chapters. On a general level, all selected games conform to a basic gameplay loop (see Figure 14) of challenges, being presented to the player, that result in rewards when overcome. These rewards contribute towards progress within the game and are necessary, to overcome the next, more difficult, challenge (Guardiola 2016). They belong mostly to the (J)RPG or Action/Adventure genre, that place a strong focus on narrative elements[18]. As such they have a plot that can be followed by the player and which is usually closely related to the system of progression within a game. This is evident with the imminent main goal of each game: playing through the story and reaching an ending. Story progress (often through cutscenes) is one form of reward to the player.

All selected games are mainly single player experiences, with no direct form of incorporation of other players into the game world during play. In some of the games, limited online functions are included. For example, it is possible to evaluate and utilize characters generated by other players in Dragon's Dogma. These online functions were not used during the TAP sessions. Ni Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria can be described as being closer to "games of progression" (Juul 2002), where players have to complete a list of predefined actions to complete the game, while Dragon's Dogma more strongly incorporates elements of "games of emergence" (Juul 2002) in that it provides various possible ways for players to act within the game world. The former three are more linear, that is the player is provided with a clear structure and sequence of events to follow, while the latter is more open, with a higher degree of freedom.

3.3 Grounded Theory

Methodologically, this thesis employs a qualitative data analysis (Schreier 2014) of user reviews and TAPs, aided by the software package MAXQDA. The data is coded, based on a grounded theory approach, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss 1967; cf. Corbin and Strauss 1990; Strübing 2014). Grounded theory (see Figure 15) is a systematic

[18] A central difference between these genres lies in the way that progress is achieved and measured. RPGs usually use numerical values, to represent the strengths and weaknesses of a character. These values can normally be raised during the game, for example by receiving experience points when defeating enemies, see e.g. Zagal and Altizer (2014). The progression in Action/Adventures is usually directly based on the player's skills and reflexes.

methodological concept for an inductive qualitative data analysis with the goal of generating theories. While originally mainly used for the analysis of interview data or field notes, grounded theory has been extended to a wide area of research and is frequently used in the analysis of documents (Brown 2010).

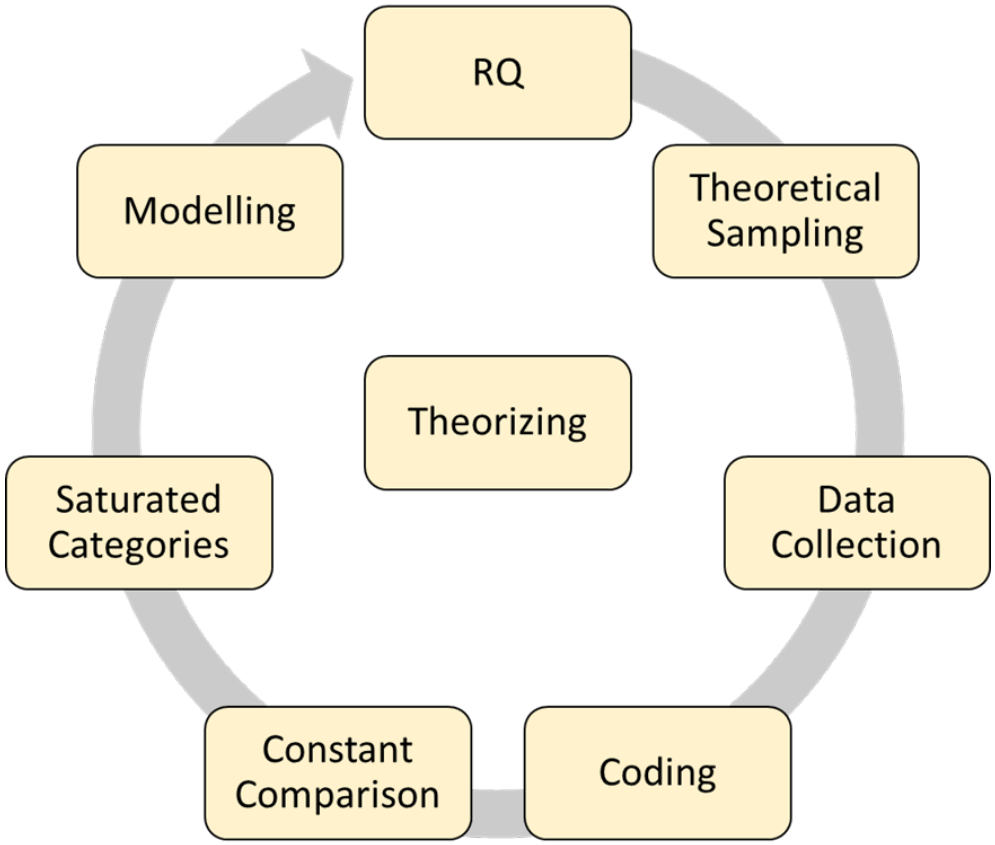


Figure 15 Representation of grounded theory coding process

Based on a research interest or research question, a theoretical sample is chosen to collect data. Theoretical sampling is "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 45; cf. Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018, 253). The data is coded in a cyclic process of open, axial, and selective coding. For this thesis, open, or initial (Charmaz 2006, 47-57) coding was first carried out close to the text, often through the use of in-vivo coding, that is text segments were directly tagged as codes. These coded text segments were then sorted into categories and higher level concepts through a process of constant comparison, where codes are subsumed into more abstract codes and grouped into categories, according to thematic proximity (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018, 254). This axial coding "relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence

to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz 2006, 60). Theories emerge by observing he relations between categories. Whereas deductive approaches are limited by an ex ante focus on analytical constructs, the grounded theory approach leads to a system of empirically grounded categories that structure the examined data holistically and therefore enable comparisons across the dataset. Categories in grounded theory are not constructed based on theoretical preconceptions but emerge and are labeled through the constant comparison of codes. Grounded theory is therefore ideally suited for this exploratory study, without prior models on the relation of culture and play to draw upon.

The coding process is continuously accompanied by the creation of memos, to document the researcher's thoughts and to keep definitions and coding practices constant over time, as it is common that codes undergo slight shifts in definition if no clear rules for the coding are provided. This also provides a means for the reproduction of the code system. In general, the coding process for the user reviews and TAPs was identical, aside from the necessity to incorporate the context of the resultant audio-visual data in the analysis of TAPs.

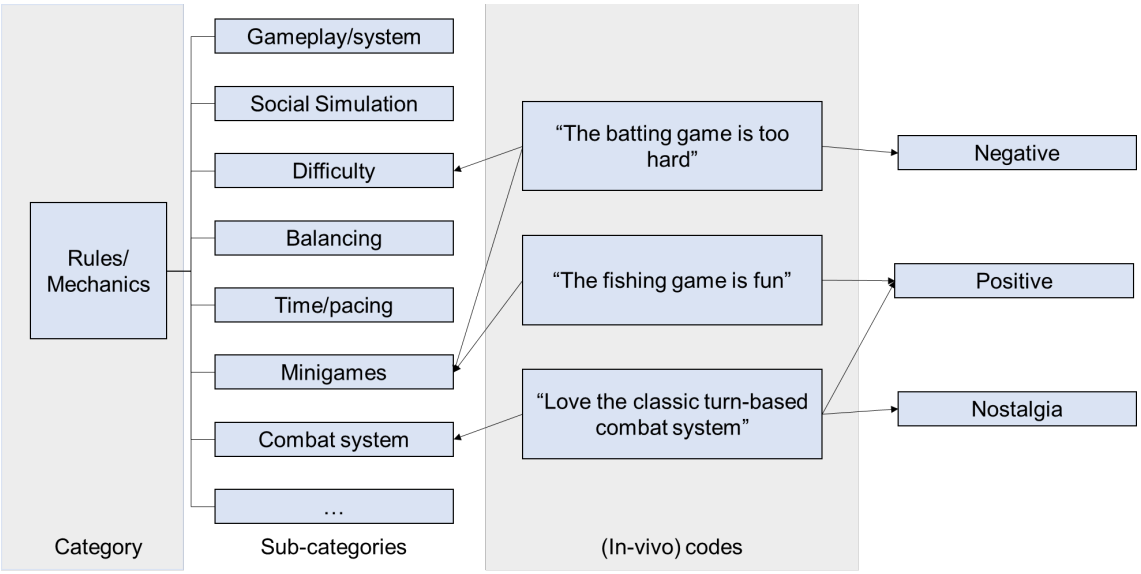


Figure 16 Example of the coding process

Figure 16 shows a simplified example of the coding process, taken from German user reviews and translated into English by the author[19]. The openly coded in-vivo codes are sorted into higher level categories, based on thematic similarity. "The batting game is too hard" and "the fishing game is fun" refer to so-called "Minigames" (i.e. games within the larger game), so

[19] Unless stated otherwise, all translations within this thesis are conducted by the author.

they are sorted into this category. The former is also sorted into the category “Difficulty” for the mention of the game being “too hard” and coded as “Negative”, because of the negative context and experience described here. “Minigame” and “Difficulty” are in turn both related to the game’s core of rules and mechanics, so they can both be sorted into this category. Like in this example, the same text segment is usually coded with different codes to account for its meaning as fully as possible. By utilizing MAXQDA for the coding process, it is possible to easily create intuitive visualizations of such code overlaps, that allow for conclusions as to how the various codes are interrelated. Note that this is a simplified overview of the coding process and the sub-categories. A more detailed look is provided by detailing the results of the analysis in the following chapter.

Coding in grounded theory is a cyclic process (see Figure 15). The code system is constantly revised and updated, until saturated categories are achieved, i.e. until the introduction of newly coded data does no longer change the code system and the resultant models (cf. Bond and Beale 2009, 419; Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018). The main purpose of a grounded theory approach is the generation of theories, by observing how categories are related to each other. The main aid MAXQDA provides here lies in making it easier to visualize the relations between codes and categories.

In grounded theory, researchers aim to be as free of preconceptions about the analyzed data as possible. This does however not mean that existing theories should not be used to contextualize the findings if appropriate. Grounded theory can therefore be used to amend existing theories as well as to generate new ones. One example of grounded theory being used in concern to games, is Calvillo-Gámez et al.’s (2015) qualitative examination of 84 game reviews and a series of interviews to identify “the core elements of the gaming experience”, in which they develop a theory of the necessary “but not sufficient” elements to provide players with a positive experience of a game. This showcases the potential of grounded theory in relation to resarch on gaming or player experience. Below follows a more detailed explanation on the analysis of user reviews and TAPs, as well as an overview of how and what data was concretely collected.

3.4 Analysis of User Reviews

3.4.1 Data Collection and Overview of the Corpus

There have been several attempts to utilize the vast amounts of text on digital games available online in bottom-up approaches through natural language processing (NLP), to contribute towards a better understanding of "what we talk about when we talk about games" (Ryan et al. 2015). User reviews have successfully been used in quantitative approaches to provide insight into how players evaluate games (Raison et al. 2012; Zagal and Tomuro 2013).

In their deductive approach, Koehler et al. (2017) study how "gamers review games" based on the examination of 200 game reviews, and using a taxonomy of game features developed by Bedwell et al. (2012). They conclude that "although this taxonomy did not prove as useful as we had anticipated […] there are rich themes that may be explored in these short, crowd-sourced reviews that players make for each other" (Koehler et al. 2017, 377). As Zagal et al. (2009, 217) note, "game reviews often include first-person accounts of the experience the game reviewer had with the game", in addition to a general description of the game, reader advice, design suggestions, media context, remarks on technology, design hypotheses and discussion of the games industry (Zagal et al. 2009, 221).

User reviews are a rich source for gaining insights into how players experience, evaluate and report on games (Zhu and Fang 2014; Tsang and Prendergast 2009; Zagal and Tomuro 2013). They are easily accessible for researchers and available in high quantities. Research is often focused on utilizing methods of natural language processing (NLP) to allow for quantitative insights into various topics. For example, user reviews have been used in marketing research to provide insights into consumer behavior and preferences (Zhu and Xiaoquan 2010), to extract usability information for products (Hedegaard and Simonsen 2013), to measure their effect on player experience (Livingston et al. 2011), to examine users' attitudes (Strååt and Verhagen 2017), or to provide feedback for game developers (Bond and Beale 2009; Lin et al. 2019).

One possible issue with using online user reviews is the potential existence of fake reviews, that is reviews that are intentionally created, usually by stakeholders, for the purpose of promoting or disparaging a product for economic reasons. However, the risk of including such reviews within the corpus of this study in a significant way is comparatively low for the following reasons. First, positive fake reviews are usually in some form related to the actual

third-party seller of a product, which significantly lowers the chance of encountering them when looking at products sold directly by Amazon or the publisher of the game, who face significantly higher costs in brand power when the inclusion of fake reviews becomes known. User reviews for games within the sample are exclusively drawn from the official Amazon product page, either sold directly by Amazon or by the game's publisher. Second, the online tool "Fakespot" (https://www.fakespot.com/) was used to identify fake reviews. Fakespot utilizes machine learning to eliminate reviews showing traits of fake or incentivized reviews. All selected games were awarded with the highest grade of "A (no fake reviews)". Third, if there are fake reviews within the corpus, their usual brevity minimizes their influence on the results of the coding analysis. Lin et al. (2019) in their extensive examination of Steam reviews, find that user reviews on Steam are usually far longer than for example app reviews. The same is true for reviews on the Amazon store, making it easier to identify at least some forms of fake reviews. While the existence of fake reviews in the corpus cannot be ruled out with absolute certainty, it is therefore at least highly unlikely, that they exert a significant influence on the overall results of the analysis.

The corpus of this study contains all user reviews of the selected 18 games on the German and Japanese Amazon stores as of October 10, 2019. The reviews were generally limited to the PS4 or Switch version of a game respectively, except for ToCS1 and ToCS2. Together with Persona 5, both games are part of the first sample of games selected for the analysis. To increase the overall number of reviews on both games, their respective PlayStation 3 (PS3) versions were included in the corpus of German reviews, as the versions of the games are largely identical, aside from an improved graphical representation in the PS4 version.

Over the course of this project, two ways to gather the user reviews were employed. For the first sample, consisting of Persona 5 and ToCS1 and 2, 169 reviews, including Steam reviews, were gathered from November 2016 to January 2018. This was done manually, by creating PDF files of the review websites. The reviews were analyzed based on the grounded theory approach described above and compared with a sample of 166 professional German and Japanese game reviews and 1,020 user comments, written in concern to these reviews (Brückner et al. 2019). The results of this analysis will not be recounted within this thesis. However, the analyzed Amazon reviews are included in the corpus of this project.

The remaining user review data for this thesis were gathered using a web crawler, to extract the review data for the selected games from the respective Amazon sites. An extension for the

Google Chrome browser, Web Scraper (https://webscraper.io/) was used in concert with a sitemap of the Amazon website. Data was collected periodically from March 1, 2018 to October 10, 2019. New games were included as part of the theoretical sampling process, based on the results of the analysis of the original corpus. The overall corpus consists of a total of 21,359 user review, 3,429 German and 17,867 Japanese (see Table 9).

Table 9 Overview of user reviews in the corpus

Game	No. of German Reviews	No. of Japanese Reviews	TOTAL
DD	37	76	113
DMC5	69	433	502
DQ11	142	2,107	2,249
FF15	549	3,701	4,250
JUD	24	712	737
KH3	321	2,674	1,658
NA	83	138	221
NK2	101	207	308
OCT	112	533	665
P5	121	1,345	1,466
RE7	544	975	1,519
Sek	298	1,560	1,858
SRR	11	24	35
ToB	59	524	529
ToCS1	17	211	228
ToCS2	9	150	160
Yak0	37	331	368
ZBotW	958	2,166	3,124
TOTAL	3,492	17,867	21,359

The difference in numbers between the German and Japanese reviews is influenced by various factors. First, the overall population of Japan, 126.5 million in 2017 according to the World Bank, is significantly higher than in Germany, with 82.9 million (The World Bank 2020). Second, due to common lags between the original Japanese release and the German release of

several of the selected games (see Table 7) there is more time for Japanese reviews to accumulate. Third, the overall popularity of the selected games and their commercial performance differs between Germany and Japan. Fourth, various games within the corpus (e.g. ToCS1 and 2, Dragon's Dogma and Ni no Kuni II) have also been released for PC on the Steam platform. Playing games on the PC is far more common in Germany than in Japan. As such, many players will play (and review) these games on Steam, instead of the Amazon store.

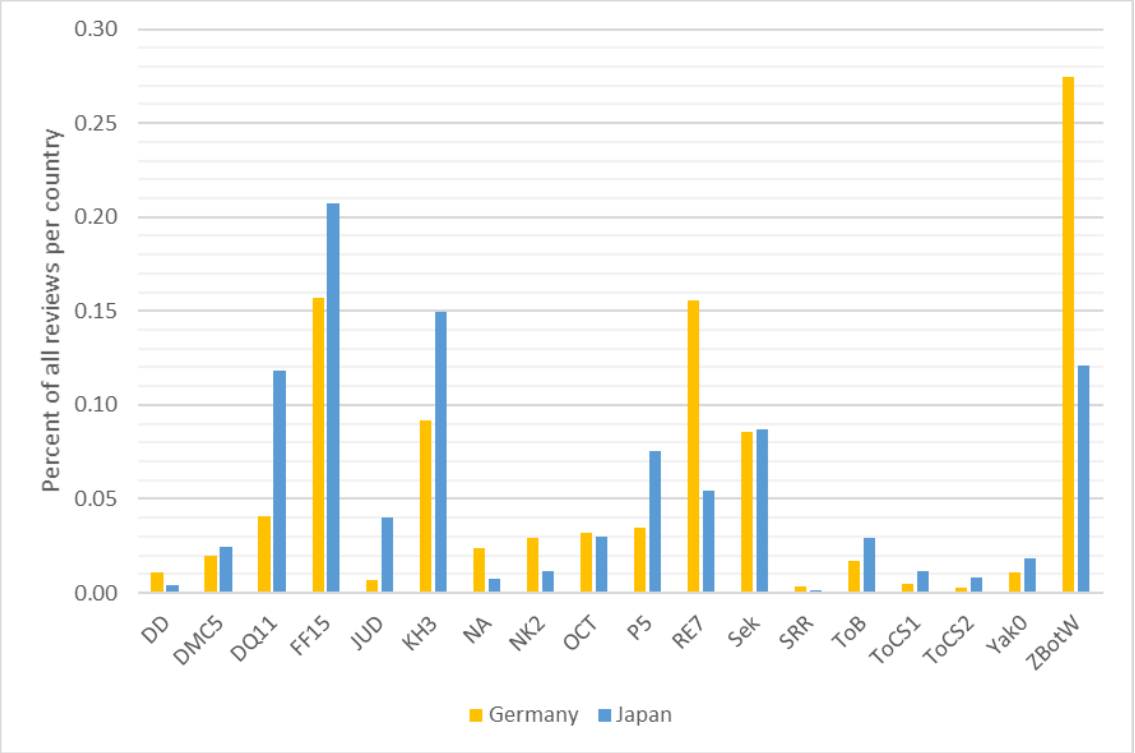


Figure 17 Reviews per game in percent of the total number of all reviews in the corpus per country

Figure 17 depicts the percentage of reviews per game in percent of the total number of reviews per country. It shows that more than a quarter (27 percent) of the reviews in the German corpus were written for the game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. This is followed by Final Fantasy XV and Resident Evil 7: Biohazard with a share of 16 percent of the reviews each. This is not surprising, as these franchises have enjoyed continuous popularity in Germany for more than two decades. The number of reviews arguably is strongly correlated to the commercial success of a game, which in turn is related to a broader player base, across different levels of player cultures. While more than 50 percent of all reviews in Germany were written for these games, the distribution is more even in the Japanese reviews, with Final Fantasy XV being the game with the highest share of reviews at 21 percent of the total. This hints at the comparatively higher popularity of these games in Japan, where for example the game Dragon Quest XI (Square Enix 2017) is arguably more closely anchored in the overall mainstream.

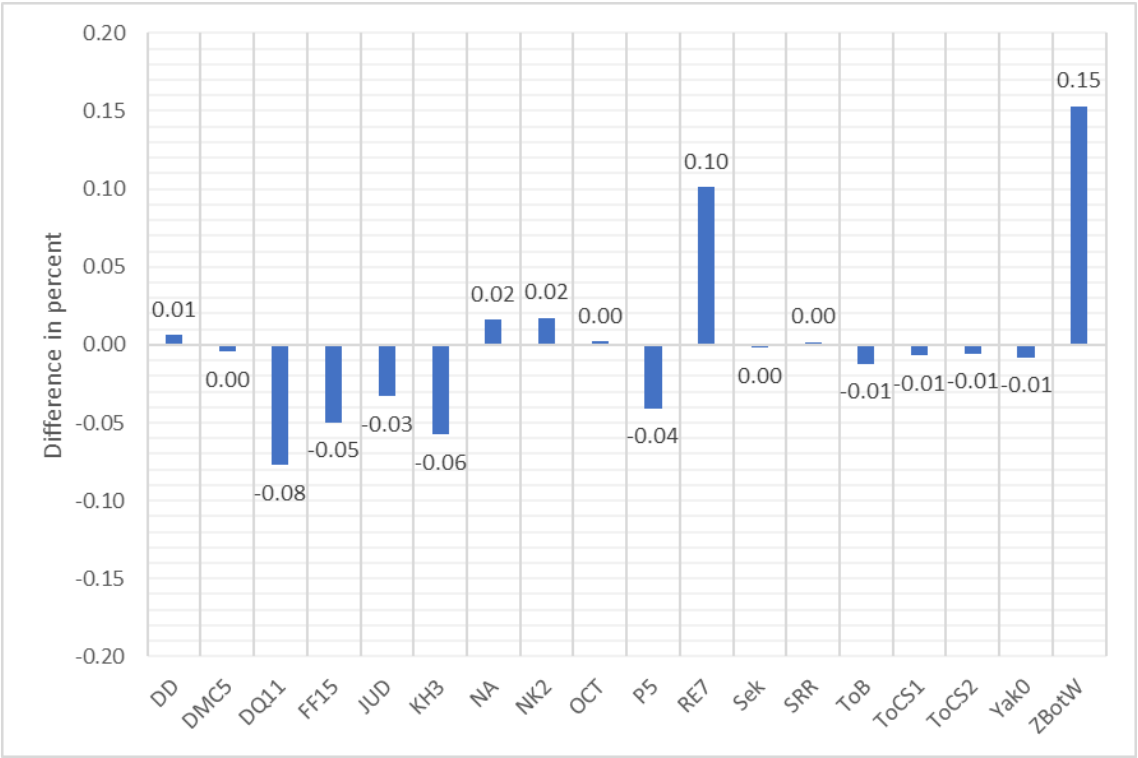


Figure 18 Difference between the percentual share per game of German and Japanese user reviews, calculated by subtracting the percentual share of the Japanese reviews from the percentual share of the German reviews

In Figure 18, the percentual share of the Japanese reviews for each game was subtracted from the percentual share of the German reviews. This visualizes the most salient differences between the German and Japanese reviews in the corpus. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild stands out with a 15 percent higher share of total reviews in the German corpus than in the Japanese corpus. The share of Resident Evil 7 in the German corpus is 10 percent higher than in the Japanese corpus. On the other hand, the games Dragon Quest XI, Final Fantasy XV and Kingdom Hearts III, and to a lesser degree, Persona 5 and Judgement (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2018/2019), hold a significantly lesser share of the overall reviews in the German, than in the Japanese corpus, which indicates a their more diverse player base in Japan when compared to German players.

3.4.2 Analyzing User Reviews

The corpus of user reviews, collected with the Web Scraper, included the following data in the form of text strings:

- The web-scraper order, i.e. a timestamp of data collection
- The web-scraper start URL, provided by the author
- The author of the review

- The title of the review
- The date of the review
- The content of the review, i.e. its main text
- The overall rating of the reviews, from 1 (worst) to 5 (best)
- Data on whether a new page was accessed to gather reviews (next and next-href)

The data was downloaded as CSV files, prepared, and imported into MAXQDA. The preparation of the data consisted of the following steps. First, the web-scraper order, start URL and the link data (next/next-href), were deleted, as they are not relevant to the analysis. Second, the date of the review, provided as part of a string such as "Rezension aus Deutschland vom 22. Februar 2017" ("review from Germany on February 22, 2017") was separated from the string and translated into a number format consisting of YYYY-MM-DD. Third, the rating was transformed from a string into an integer. Fourth, an ID was added to all reviews, to identify which game they belong to. The ID consists of a country code (GER for Germany and JAP for Japan) and the abbreviation of the game. For example, all reviews on the game Final Fantasy XV from the German Amazon store are identified as GER_FF15. Finally, the reviews were randomized, through the generation of a random number using Excel, and then imported into MAXQDA. Randomization is used instead of an alphabetical or chronological order, as the former would lead to an overrepresentation of anonymous ("amazon customer") reviewers, while the latter poses the problem of reviews focusing on the technical problems present in the launch version of a game, later solved by updates. As the German version of a game is frequently released later than the Japanese version and such technical problems are often solved by that time, randomization heightens the comparability of the data.

A separate document was created for every review. Author, date and the rating of each game (a score of 1 to 5) were automatically transformed into variables associated with the respective document. The data was however also included in the text documents themselves as string data. Documents were sorted into document groups per country and game, resulting in 36 document groups. Amendments were made in concern to the corpus of reviews analyzed between 2017 and 2018 on Persona 5 and ToCS. These were imported as PDF files including the already coded segments. Two document sets were created for all German and all Japanese reviews respectively, to facilitate easier analysis (see Figure 19).

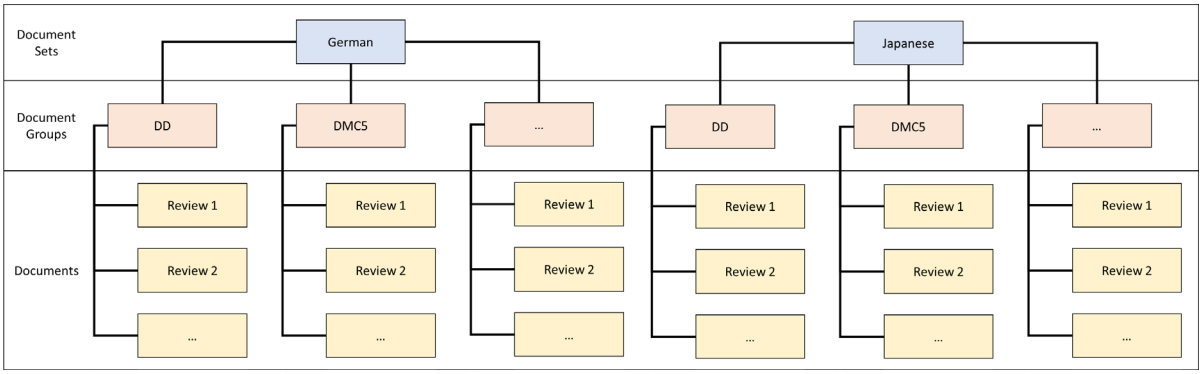


Figure 19 Overview of the utilized document structure, with one review per document

The actual analysis of the user reviews was carried out in two phases. The first set of data analyzed was limited to the games Persona 5 and ToCS1 and 2 (Brückner et al. 2019). This forms the core of the analysis and served as a pre-survey, to evaluate and improve the analysis method, through the feedback gained after publishing the results. Based on this, the following standards were established. First, a system of one review per document was introduced, to enable more forms of analysis, such as binary coding. Second, the method of coding was revised, to include more in-vivo codes in the first round of coding.

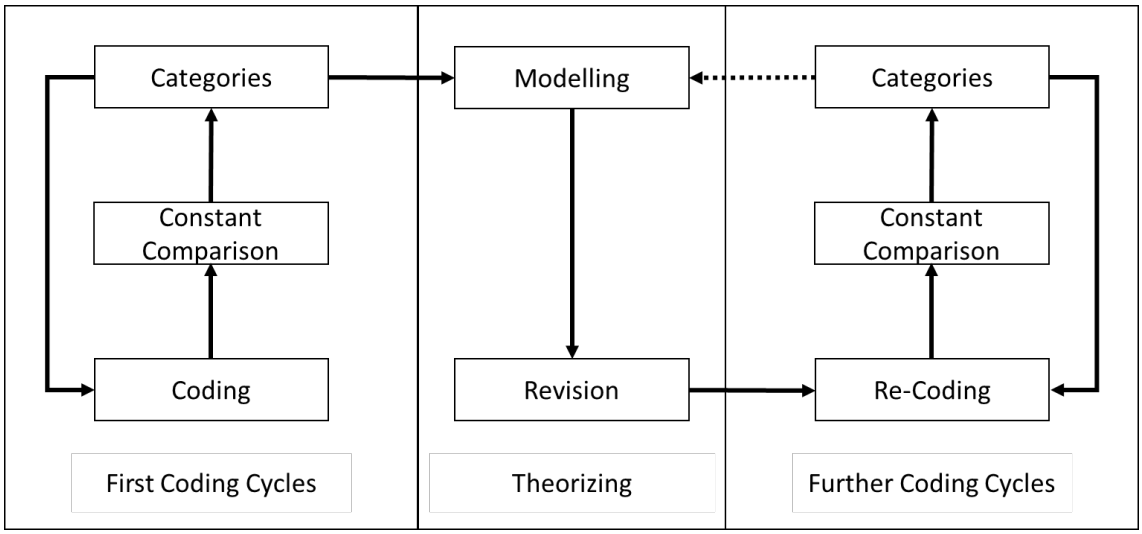


Figure 20 Schematic overview of the coding process and continuous coding cycles

Coding itself (cf. Saldaña 2015) was carried out solely by the author. As such, no measurement of intercoder-reliability can be provided. However, the coding process and resultant codes and categories were constantly discussed with other researchers, to heighten objectivity. The code system was also frequently revised, and codes were evaluated and recoded continuously to ensure that cognitive biases towards the coding process were as low as possible (see Figure 20). Based on the categories that emerged in the coding process, a dictionary was created to examine

the larger corpus of user reviews quantitatively, which also serves as a method of validation for the results of the qualitative analysis (see Chapter 4).

Codes were assigned exclusively within the environment of MAXQDA (see Figure 21). A total of 460 user reviews, 246 from Germany and 214 from Japan were analyzed based on the grounded theory approach described above. For each game, reviews for the analysis were chosen randomly, to minimize the effect of the variable of time. This was done to account for the frequent differences in the released date of the games in each country. As the games were usually first released in Japan, they potentially included more bugs, etc. than in the German release. The randomization makes it possible to reduce the effect of this phenomenon. An effort was made to include at least five reviews per game and country in the analysis and to analyze a similar overall number of German and Japanese reviews. In accordance with the grounded theory approach of this thesis, coding was continued until saturated categories were achieved, that is until new themes, necessitating new codes, could no longer be identified. This state was reached after analyzing approximately 300 reviews. After that point, additions to the code system were only made on the level of highest granularity, while categories remained constant.

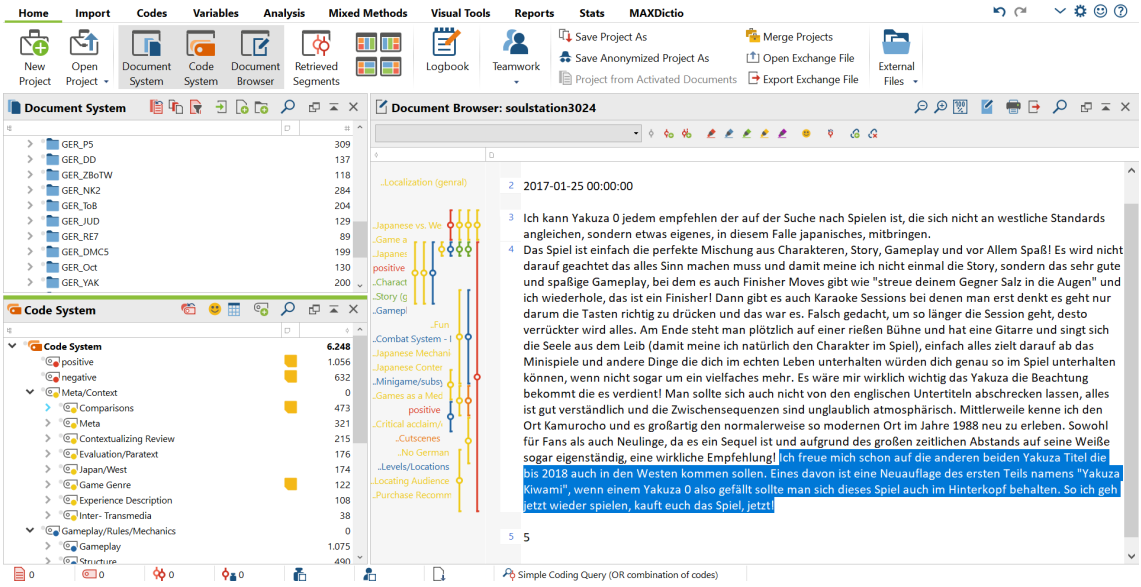


Figure 21 Screenshot of the user interface of MAXQDA

Table 10 shows the number of user reviews that were analyzed qualitatively per game and country. During the analysis, several (generally German) reviews were encountered that did not review the game per se, but only its shipment process. These reviews were discarded. The high number of reviews analyzed for the games Persona 5, and to a lesser degree ToCS 1 and 2, are due to these games forming the basis of the most-similar case design and the first stage

of analysis (Brückner et al. 2019). The reviews were recoded using the same standards as the remaining reviews in the corpus. For the game Shining Resonance, all German and Japanese reviews were analyzed. This was possible because of their low number and motivated by theoretical concerns, in particular the game's inclusion of highly sexualized female characters, not present in this form in the other selected games, which was a frequent topic during the TAP sessions.

Table 10 Number of user reviews analyzed qualitatively per game and country.

Game	Analyzed User Reviews (DE)	Analyzed User Reviews (JP)	TOTAL
DD	12	6	18
DMC5	15	7	22
DQ11	7	6	13
FF15	22	15	37
JUD	10	6	16
KH3	10	7	17
NA	11	10	21
NK2	12	6	18
Oct	7	5	12
P5	58	47	105
RE7	6	6	12
Sek	10	10	20
SRR	11	23	34
ToB	11	12	23
ToCS1	18	20	38
ToCS2	9	10	19
Yak0	6	6	12
ZBotW	11	12	23
TOTAL	246	214	460

The first step of the coding process was the open coding, on a high level of granularity. In this phase, frequent use of the in-vivo function of MAXQDA was made, to directly define text parts as a code. The resulting codes were constantly compared to each other and grouped together by thematic proximity (axial coding). The resulting categories were in turn subsumed into parent categories with lower granularity, through the same process of constant comparison.

For example, one German review on the game Yakuza 0 (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2017) finds the game to be the "perfect mix of characters, story and gameplay", while one Japanese reviewer argues that the "the story was extremely interesting". In a first step, such sentences themselves were coded as in-vivo codes. Next followed the axial coding, through the essentially hermeneutic process of constant comparison. In this example, both reviewers mention the game's story on a general level. Both codes are thus sorted into a *Story (general)* category. The German reviewer also mentioned the game's characters and gameplay, so the text segment was coded into multiple categories accounting for these dimensions. Furthermore, both were positive comments, so they were also coded with the demarcation *Positive*.

Such code hierarchies can grow tremendously during analysis. During the data analysis for this thesis, up to eight levels of hierarchical codes, from high granularity in-vivo codes to highly abstract concepts such as *Story (general)*, were coded in the first coding cycle. In-vivo and other low-level codes were then gradually subsumed into higher level categories through the cycles of axial coding, to construct an analytically effective code system. The resulting code system itself is a core empirical contribution of this thesis, as it describes the breadth and diversity of reported player experiences and is detailed in Chapter 4.

The qualitative analysis of user reviews was augmented by a limited quantitative analysis. The corpus of user reviews consists of 11,400,768 characters in total. This is however a somewhat misleading number, as Japanese characters generally convey more meaning than letters in languages using a Latin alphabet. The 3,492 German user reviews contain 3,825,333 characters, while the 17,867 Japanese reviews contain a total of 7,575,435. The length of reviews does vary greatly. The shortest Japanese and German review both contain only two characters, "ok" in the German review and "*saikō*" ("perfect") in the Japanese review. On the other hand, the longest German review contains 13,179 and the longest Japanese review 10,438 characters. The average length of reviews is approximately 1,095 characters for German and 424 for Japanese reviews.

Figure 22 depicts the deviation of the average number of characters (without title) per review, game and country, from the average length of all reviews per country. While the overall trend is largely the same, some differences are apparent. Although only by a slight margin, the trends for the games Kingdom Hearts III, Tales of Berseria and Yakuza 0 are different in Germany and Japan. German reviews for Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria are slightly shorter than average, while the Japanese reviews tend to be longer. The reverse is true for the game

Yakuza 0. Although the difference of meaning conveyed per character is different between German and Japanese reviews, it also stands out that the reviews for Final Fantasy XV and both Trails of Cold Steel games tend to be significantly longer than average, while reviews on the game Judgement are on average more than 500 characters shorter.

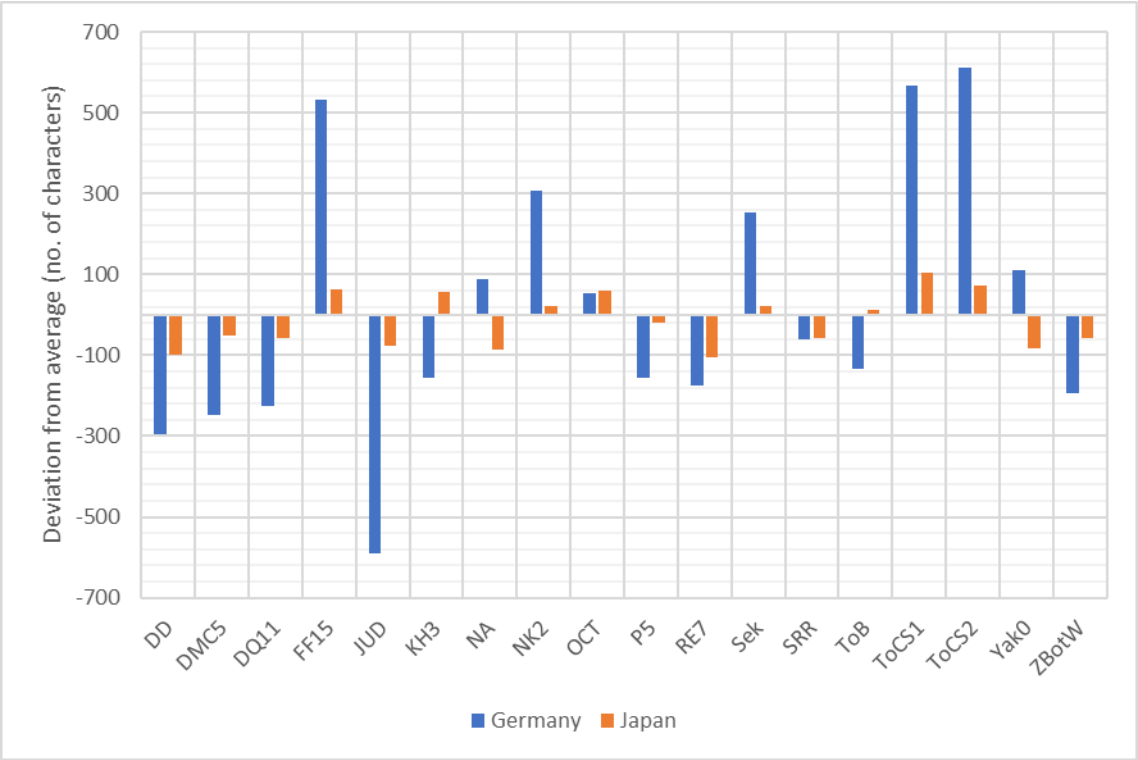


Figure 22 Deviation from average number of characters for all reviews, per game and country

The corpus of reviews was examined in the following ways. First, the overall evaluation, as expressed in the ratings of the games was compared. Second, word frequencies were calculated, through the adaptation and amendment of existing stop-lists to extract the dominant topics within the corpus. This was however hindered by the inability of MAXQDA to provide reliably information on the frequencies of Japanese terms. Third, based on the resultant codes and categories of the qualitative analysis, a dictionary was created to quantitatively examine the frequency and overall distribution of salient topics in the overall corpus of user reviews and to showcase the quantitative dimension of similarities and differences between the German and Japanese corpus. For this analysis, separate document sets for good (four or five stars) and bad (three or less stars) German and Japanese reviews were created, to also account for differences between negative and positive evaluation. This does however not allow for an in-depth analysis of the concepts, nor is it truly comprehensive or objective, as certain biases are inherent in the creation of the dictionary. These biases are partially the result of difficulties to develop a dictionary that accounts for semantic differences in the German and Japanese corpus and

partially the results of the limitations of a qualitative analysis. However, the results of the quantitative analysis provide some insights into the quantitative distribution of specific topics within the larger corpus of user reviews.

3.5 Think-Aloud Protocol

3.5.1 Participants and Set-Up

The second empirical source of data for this thesis are the result of recorded play sessions with nine German and eleven Japanese players, using think-aloud protocol. This method to gather data more directly from players during play, supplements the analysis of user reviews with qualitative data on momentary PX. It also serves to include the opinion of players in the analysis that are not necessarily part of the micro- or meso-level cultures, surrounding some of the games, which are strongly represented within the corpus of user reviews. For example, it becomes possible to let players with little prior experience with Japanese games play games such as Ni no Kuni II, for which user reviews appear to be largely written by members of specific Japanophile sub-cultures. Through the most-similar case design in concern to game selection, it is possible to narrow down the variables present within the games, that are then discussed in the user reviews. However, the concrete composition of the audience remains an external factor that cannot be influenced. On the other hand, the use of TAP allows the concrete selection of participants, based on their characteristics, albeit limited by constraints of time and expenses.

Originating from work on cognitive psychology (Ericsson and Simon 1980) TAP is employed in a wide range of disciplines, such as translation studies (Jääskeläinen 2010), second language education (Bowles 2010) or usability testing (van den Haak et al. 2003), to enable the analysis of participants' thought processes. In digital game studies and game user research, TAP has been frequently referenced as a means of gathering qualitative data on player-game interaction (Drachen et al. 2018), but has thus far mostly been used for usability and playability testing (e.g. Olsen et al. 2011), predominantly by large-scale game developers (Brown 2010, 82).

The advantages and disadvantages of using TAP have been broadly discussed (e.g. Jääskeläinen 2010). It is a valid instrument to gather qualitative data on momentary game user experience. It is also the only viable method to gather data on user's cognitive processes during play (i.e. momentary experience), in contrast to methods used to measure affective and

behavioral dimensions of the play experience, such as quantitative measurements of physiological data (Tan et al. 2014). TAP is therefore ideally suited to explore the thought processes and experiences of German and Japanese players interacting with Japanese games. There are, however, several potential drawbacks associated with conventional applications of TAP. The most prominent problem is the burden it puts on the player. The constant vocalization of their thoughts potentially interferes with their immersion into the game world, potentially inhibiting them from reaching a "flow state" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014), i.e. the complete absorption into what they do. This can negatively affect the quality of the gathered data (Ribbens and Poels 2009).

One way of alleviating such difficulties is the use of retrospective think-aloud protocol (RTA). In RTA, players are recorded during play and only later asked to describe their impressions while being shown the footage of their session (Ribbens and Poels 2009, 5). While this possibly allows for increased immersion by the user during play, it also temporally removes the point of data gathering from the actual period of use. Another caveat of using TAP lies in the laboratory setting, influencing player experience, as players are asked to play a game they might otherwise not play, in an environment foreign to them.

For this study, a modified version of TAP was designed, to provide a maximum of high-quality data on momentary player experience, while minimizing the burden it places on the player. This is based on the results of a pre-survey, from July 2018, with two German participants in a laboratory setting in Germany. The main findings in concern to the realization of TAP in this pre-survey were (1) difficulties for players to voice their thoughts during periods of stress, such as during combat, and (2) the negative effect of the lab-setting on the immersion of players, as they were not able to concentrate fully on the game within the foreign environment.

Consequently, later participants were encouraged to constantly voice their thoughts, but also instructed to prioritize their experience and remain silent if necessary. Additional post-play interviews were carried out, to fill in the gaps and provide participants with a chance to present their overall thoughts on the games. After finishing a game, participants also provided a short summary of their impressions and experiences. This effectively combines the benefits of concurrent and retrospective think-aloud protocol approaches. The combination of TAP and post-play interviews also enables players to reflect on their experience and to provide new insights or clarifications. As individual differences exist in how easily players (cf. O'Hagan 2009c) were able to talk during play, the importance of these post-play interviews varies

between participants. The negative effects of the lab setting cannot be completely negated. For play sessions were recorded in Germany in the participants' homes, by lending out the necessary equipment[20]. This required participants to own a PlayStation 4. Except for one participant, the play sessions in Japan were exclusively recorded at the Keio University Shonan-Fujisawa campus.

Table 11 Overview of TAP participants

Code	Sex	Age	Native Language	Hardcore / Casual Gamer	Platform used	Experience in Japan	Japanese Media Consumption
D01	M	27	German	Hardcore	PC, PS4, Switch	None	Anime, Games
D02	F	26	German	Casual	PC, Smartphone	None	Anime
D03	F	25	German	Hardcore	PS3, 3DS	> 1 year	Anime, Manga, Games
D04	M	24	German	Hardcore	PC	< 1 year	None
D05	M	26	German	Casual	PC, PS3	< 1 year	None
D06	M	19	German	Casual	PS4	None	None
D07	M	23	German	Hardcore	PS4, PC, Smartphone	None	Anime, Manga, Games
D08	M	29	German	Hardcore	PC	> 1 year	None
D09	M	27	German	Hardcore	PS4, Smartphone	< 1 year	Anime, Games
J01	F	22	Japanese	Casual	3DS, Smartphone		
J02	F	23	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4		
J03	F	18	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4, Switch, Smartphone		
J04	M	25	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4, Switch, Smartphone		
J05	F	20	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4, Smartphone		
J06	M	21	Japanese	Casual	PS3		
J07	M	22	Japanese	Casual	PS4, 3DS		
J08	M	22	Japanese	Casual	PS3		
J09	F	28	Japanese	Casual	Smartphone		
J10	F	27	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4, Smartphone		
J11	M	29	Japanese	Hardcore	PS4, Switch, Smartphone		

In total, nine German and eleven Japanese participants were recruited (see Table 11). "German" participants were defined as being native speakers of German, raised in the German language area (including Austria and the German speaking parts of Switzerland). Japanese participants

[20] The recording of play sessions in Germany was made possible by the support of the Global Environmental System Leaders (GESL) graduate program and was realized as part of an international training in Germany.

were selected from native speakers of Japanese. The age of participants was set to 18-30 years of age, to limit differences in general media use and literacy. German participants were asked on whether they had any prior experiences of travelling to Japan, or how long they stayed. Out of the nine German participants four (D01, D02, D06, D07) were recorded in Germany and have never been to Japan. Three had stayed for less than a year and did not claim proficiency in Japanese, while the remaining two participants had already stayed for more than a year and were proficient in Japanese. This makes it possible to account for different levels of familiarity with Japanese culture that might influence players' experience of the selected games.

All participants were also asked about their general playing habits, and their general consumption of media, with five German participants claiming that they frequently consume Japanese pop culture, particularly anime. Participants were sorted into "hardcore" and "casual" players, based on Kapalo et al.'s (2015) definition, discussed in Section 2.3. One difference between the German and Japanese participants is the high number of German participants who usually play games on PC. None of the Japanese participants professed to do so. On the other hand, seven Japanese participants reported that they regularly play games on their smartphones, while only three of the German participants do so.

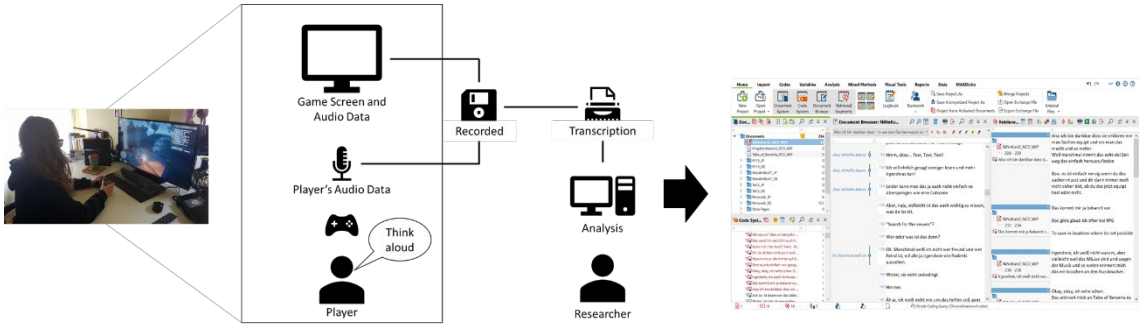


Figure 23 Schematic overview of TAP from data collection to analysis

Figure 23 shows the overall set-up of the recorded play sessions using think aloud protocol. Participants were asked to play four games, Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III, Tales of Berseria and Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen for the PlayStation 4 (see Section 3.2). During play, the participants were asked to voice their thoughts on the games as constantly as possible, while still being able to concentrate on the game. A capture card (AverMedia Live Gamer Portable 2) was used, to capture the screen and audio data of the game. Participants wore a headset, connected to the capture card, through which their voice was recorded. The resulting audio-visual data, game footage overlaid with the participants' voices, and post-play interviews

were transcribed, to enable the computer assisted qualitative data analysis of the documents, using the same methodology as described above for the analysis of user reviews.

In detail, the TAP method used consisted of the following steps: (1) semi-structured interviews with participants to clarify their attributes, e.g. gaming history, related hobbies, etc.; (2) instruction for TAP and first supervised session, to assure the quality of the recording; (3) actual recording of screen and voice data; 4) post interviews, with the game footage as necessary (RTA); (5) transcription of the data; (6) analysis, employing a coding process based on grounded theory, also taking into account the emotional state of players by simultaneously examining the video footage during the coding process.

Four of the German participants (D01, D02, D06 and D07) were recorded in Germany. This was done, to include German players without extensive experience in Japan. They were recorded in their home environment, providing them with the game software, a game capture card to record their screen data and a headset to record their voice. Using cloud storage, a system was set up to allow players the comfort of playing in their homes, while making it possible to keep close track of their progress and generated data remotely. Participants were instructed to play at least two hours per game in total. and play for at least 30 minutes per session. They were asked to record a minimum of 10 hours of data but were free to play longer.

Figure 24 A Japanese participant during the recorded play session

Moving the setting of TAP to participant's homes brings with it advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage lies in the more familiar environment to the participants, likely heightening immersion. The main drawback lies in the limited ability of the researcher to supervise the play session directly, which can for example lead to problems with setting up the

equipment. Another drawback is organizational in nature, as the necessary equipment to record a play session (game soft- and hardware, capture card, headset) can only be lent to a limited number of people. For the German participants in Germany, one requirement was that they owned a PlayStation 4, as it was not possible to lend out the console. The sessions in Japan, including the remaining six German, and all Japanese participants, were carried out at the Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus. The advantage of this setting was the lower administrative hurdle, the ability of direct supervision by the researcher and that all participants played under the same conditions (see Figure 24), heightening the comparability of data.

3.5.2 Overview of Data and Limitations

Table 12 Time each participant spent per game in minutes, J05 was unable to complete her play sessions for the last two games, because of the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020

Participant	NK2 (m)	KH3 (m)	ToB (m)	DD (m)	TOTAL
D01	243	151	170	173	737
D02	260	252	141	130	783
D03	161	201	155	161	678
D04	161	180	153	180	674
D05	152	156	152	151	611
D06	173	163	150	151	637
D07	148	153	161	150	612
D08	132	147	149	153	581
D09	149	151	143	150	593
J01	104	192	144	161	601
J02	170	139	152	150	611
J03	155	158	151	157	621
J04	178	189	154	168	689
J05	159	136			295
J06	163	153	187	166	669
J07	155	148	153	156	612
J08	156	154	155	152	617
J09	151	150	144	132	577
J10	145	154	153	146	598
J11	153	170	157	162	642
TOTAL	3,268	3,297	2,924	2,949	12,438

The main goal for including TAPs as empirical data in this thesis lies in supplementing the data of the user reviews, reflecting episodic and remembered PX, with data on the momentary experience of players. While the TAPs are also a form of self-reported data and do not

completely reflect the actual intrinsic PX of the participants. The continuous data generation throughout the play experience allows for a more nuanced picture of overall PX, that accounts for differences over time and details usually left out of later reports, such as user reviews. However, the scale of the TAP sessions is limited, as they require a high amount of time and effort, for data collection, as well as for analysis. Table 12 shows the amount of time spent on each game per participant. In total, more than 207 hours of gameplay footage were recorded, resulting in more than 1.2 TB of data.

TAP provides a rich amount of qualitative data, close to actual momentary PX. However, the limited number of participants does not allow for broad generalizations based on the results. TAP is therefore ideally used in concert with other approaches, such as the analysis of user reviews in this thesis. Participants were chosen to reflect different player groups (hardcore vs casual) and German players were additionally controlled for their experiences with Japan and Japanese media.

The 20 participants are all under 30 years of age. Snowball sampling was used in participant selection and German participants tend to be slightly older (average: 25.11 years) than the Japanese participants (average: 23.36 years). Although an effort was made to include German participants with no experience in Japan, this was only possible for four of the participants. Three participants (D04, D05, D09) were recruited during a short time stay of less than one year in Japan, either for an internship or as part of a student exchange. Two participants (D03, D08) had however spent more than one year in Japan by the time of recording the play sessions.

Although, the inclusion of German participants with experience in Japan contributes towards this research by providing insights into how cultural acclimatization can affect the PX for German players of Japanese games, as well as by including player that are arguably part of the specific target groups of the selected games, they are slightly overrepresented within the group of participants. Also, only two of the German participants were female, while six women were included in the Japanese participants.

Lastly, the recorded sessions were limited to about 2.5 hours per game. This was necessary for practical reasons. The inclusion of the selected four games was decided upon, based on their characteristics regarding aesthetic, story and gameplay elements. However, each of these games usually requires between 30 to 60 hours for a complete playthrough. The limit of ten hours of recorded playtime per participant is the result of a trade-off between the number of participants and the actual time recorded per participant. However, while 2.5 hours per game

do not allow for an accurate overall evaluation of each game, this is not the purpose of the TAPs. As all participants played under the same constraints, the limited amount of time spent per game does not impair the quality of data on the participants' PX and does not limit their comparability.

4 Results

4.1 User Reviews

4.1.1 Code System and the Structure of Game User Reviews

The 460 reviews analyzed in the qualitative analysis amount to 509,107 characters in total. The German reviews consist of 359,041 characters, while the total for the analyzed Japanese reviews is 150,066. By the end of the analysis, 61.2 percent of this corpus was covered by codes (see Appendix A-1). The first main result of this thesis lies in the code system itself, that is the sum of concepts, categories and codes generated through the qualitative analysis of the user reviews. The overall frequencies of codes and the code system with brief memos on the use of each code are included in the Appendix (see Appendix A-2 and A-3).

The cycle of open and axial coding resulted in a system with the following top-level categories:

- *Positive*[21] and *Negative* are used as markers to signify the sentimental context in which other categories and codes are used. Text segments are coded as *Positive*/*Negative* if they reflect overall positive/negative opinions, experiences or evaluations. Their overlap with other codes creates an easy way to identify and visualize the general sentiment of passages coded with other codes.

- *Meta/Context* subsumes all codes related to the larger contextual frame or ecosystem in which a game exists. This includes for example comparisons to other games or media, discussions about the developer or marketing/localization practices, contextualization of the review, discussions about the potential audience of a game, etc.

- *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* subsumes all comments that are made in regard to a game's mechanics, systems or rules. By German players, this is usually referred to as "gameplay", while Japanese players most frequently use the word "system" (*shisutemu*).

- *Story/Narrative* includes the codes for all text segments written on a game's story or narrative elements, including, plot, setting, characters, dialogue etc.

[21] Categories and codes are delineated within the text by capital letters and italics.

- *Audio/Visual* includes comments made in concern to a game's audio-visual elements, such as overall visual style, the quality of graphics or the game's soundtrack.

- *Technology* subsumes all codes that are made in concern to a game's technology, for example on loading times or the existence of bugs. Comments on a game's framerates or resolution were coded in a subcategory of this category, instead of the *Aesthetics* category.

Aside from these categories in which the resulting codes of the qualitative analysis were subsumed through constant comparison, a category for *Structure* was used to make text documents within the corpus more navigable. The codes within this category denote the different parts of a document, including *Title*, *Date*, *Content* and *Rating*. They were automatically generated by MAXQDA, during the import of data from the spreadsheets but are not relevant to the presentation of results and their discussion and excluded from the report of results.

The main purpose of the five thematic categories *Meta/Context*, *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*, *Story/Narrative*, *Aesthetics* and *Technology* is to provide insights into the structure of game user reviews, the degrees to which these topics are discussed in them and the relations between these topics. For this purpose, high-level categories with low granularity are useful to structure and visualize the findings of the qualitative analysis. The categories, aside from the *Meta/Context* category, are highly similar to Schell's elemental tetrad (Schell 2008) described in Chapter 2. They reflect the reciprocal nature of player game interaction, with PX and the resulting reports being directly shaped by the affordances provided by the game. These categories are the direct results of comparing and sorting lower level codes of higher granularity. They are empirically grounded results of inductive bottom-up coding using the method of constant comparison. The names of the categories themselves are based on the terms employed in the user reviews. This dataset does however not include a statistically representative sample of Japanese user reviews, nor does the qualitative approach taken in this study lend itself to a quantitative interpretation. The results presented below, such as the frequency of codes, should therefore not be understood as statistically significant or representative. Instead they are used to structure and visualize the qualitative findings.

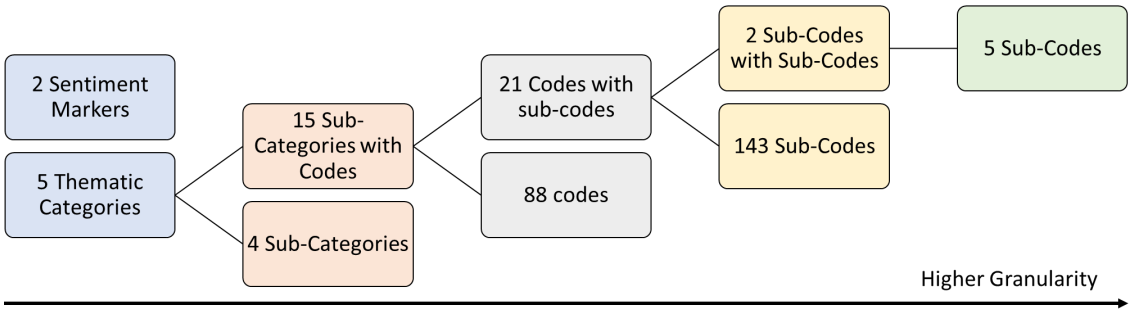


Figure 25 Hierarchical representation of the code system

Across the 460 reviews in the corpus for the qualitative analysis, 6,270 text segments were coded. The final code system consists of 285 codes. Aside from the single-level sentiment markers *Positive* and *Negative*, there are between two to five levels of codes and categories, from low-level high granularity codes, to high-level low granularity categories (see Figure 25). Higher level codes and categories were formed by organizing sub-categories and codes through constant comparison. Figure 26 presents a concrete example. The top-level category *Meta/Context* consists of several categories including *Comparison* and *Context*. *Comparison*, in turn, consists of sub-categories, including one for *Western Games*. Within this sub-category are again codes of higher granularity, that depict the concrete game or franchise to which a comparison was drawn. Code frequencies for categories are calculated by aggregating the code frequency of all lowermost codes within a category. Text segments that are coded by multiple codes or sub-codes of a category are only counted once.

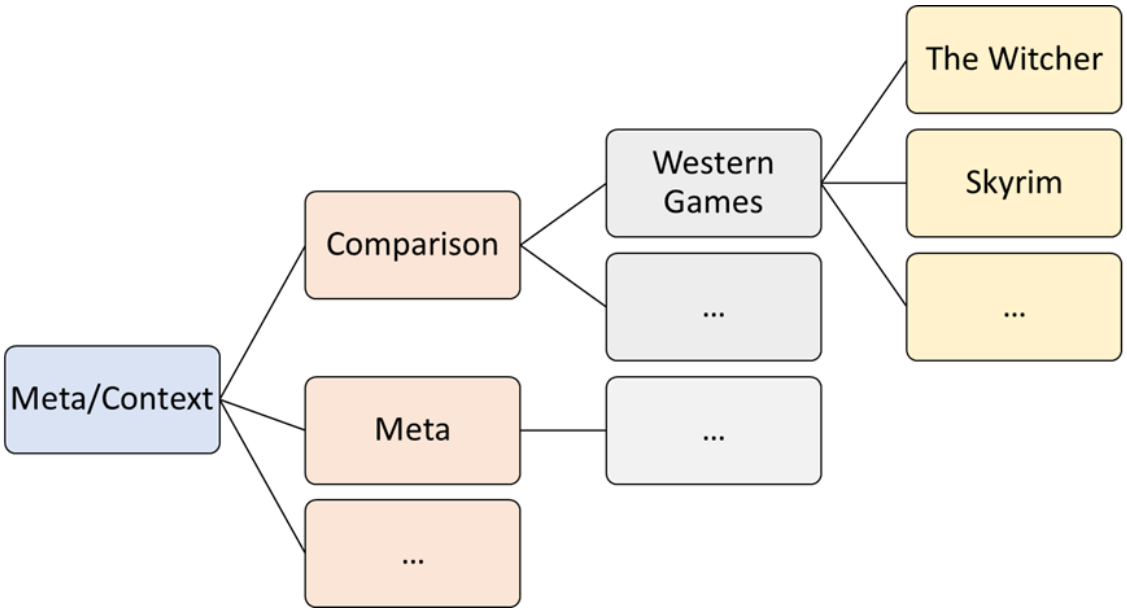


Figure 26 Example of the hierarchical code system

The overall distribution of coded segments on the level of the uppermost categories is largely similar between the corpus of German and Japanese user reviews (see Figure 27). Both show a higher number of positive than negative codes. The frequency of negative codes within the Japanese corpus does however appear to be higher than in the German document set. The most frequent categories coded in both corpuses were the *Meta/Context* category and the *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* categories. This is largely based on their broad scope, as they include more sub-codes than other categories.

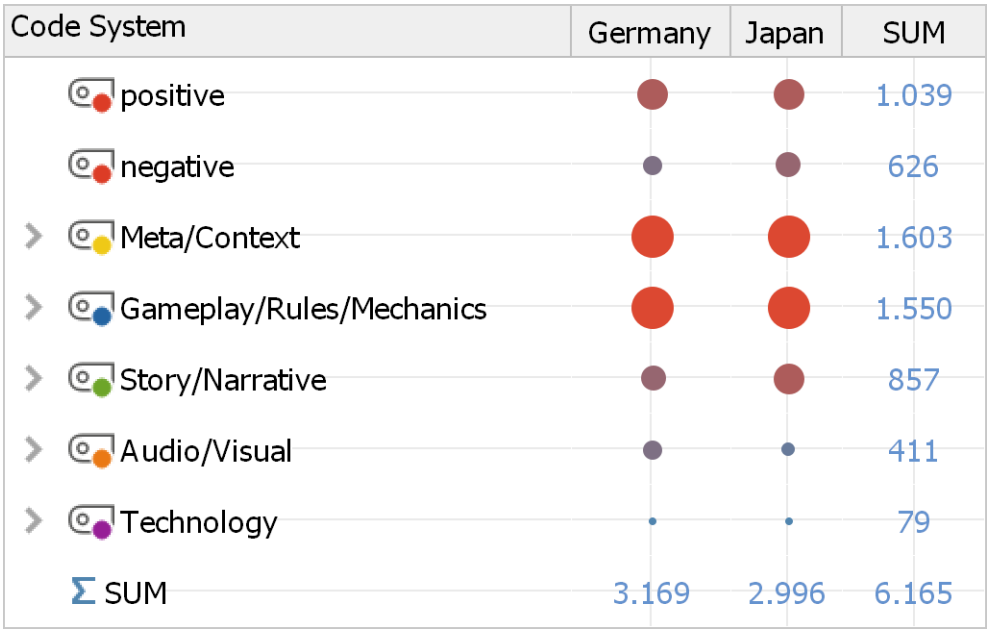


Figure 27 MAXQDA code matrix representing the frequency of codes on the level of top-level categories. The size of the circles is calculated based on the relative frequency of codes within the document sets

Figure 28 solely depicts the thematic categories, without the *Positive* and *Negative* codes. The overall distribution of codes within the German and Japanese document sets again follow the same pattern, with a high frequency of text segments beign coded with codes belonging to the *Meta/Context* and *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* categories. By comparing the German and Japanese document set, a tendency for more segments being coded with *Audio/Visual* in the German set is apparent, while a comparatively higher percentage of segments in the Japanese set are coded with codes belonging ot the category *Story/Narrative*. Altough the analyzed reviews are not necessarily representative of the overall corpus, this does correlate to salient differences in the German and Japanese descriptons of players' experiences in concern to the selected games, which are discussed in more detail below.

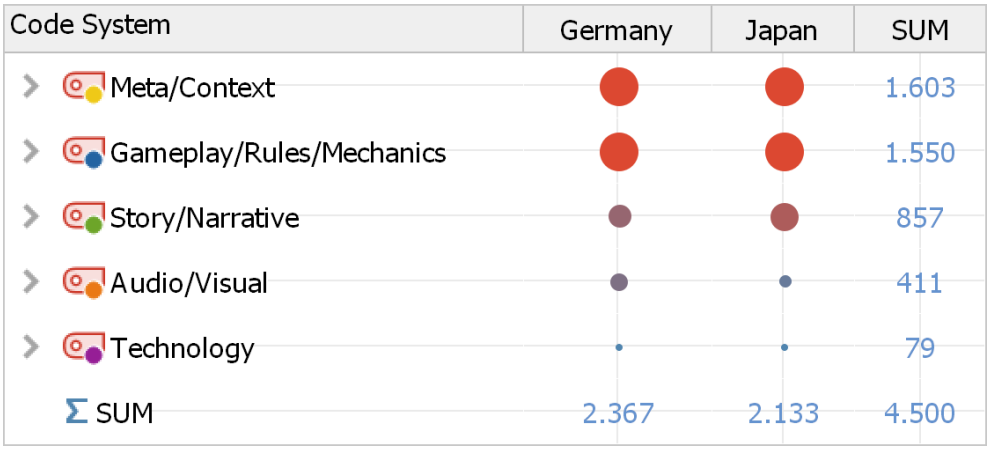


Figure 28 Frequency of top-level categories for thematic categories, without Positive and Negative codes

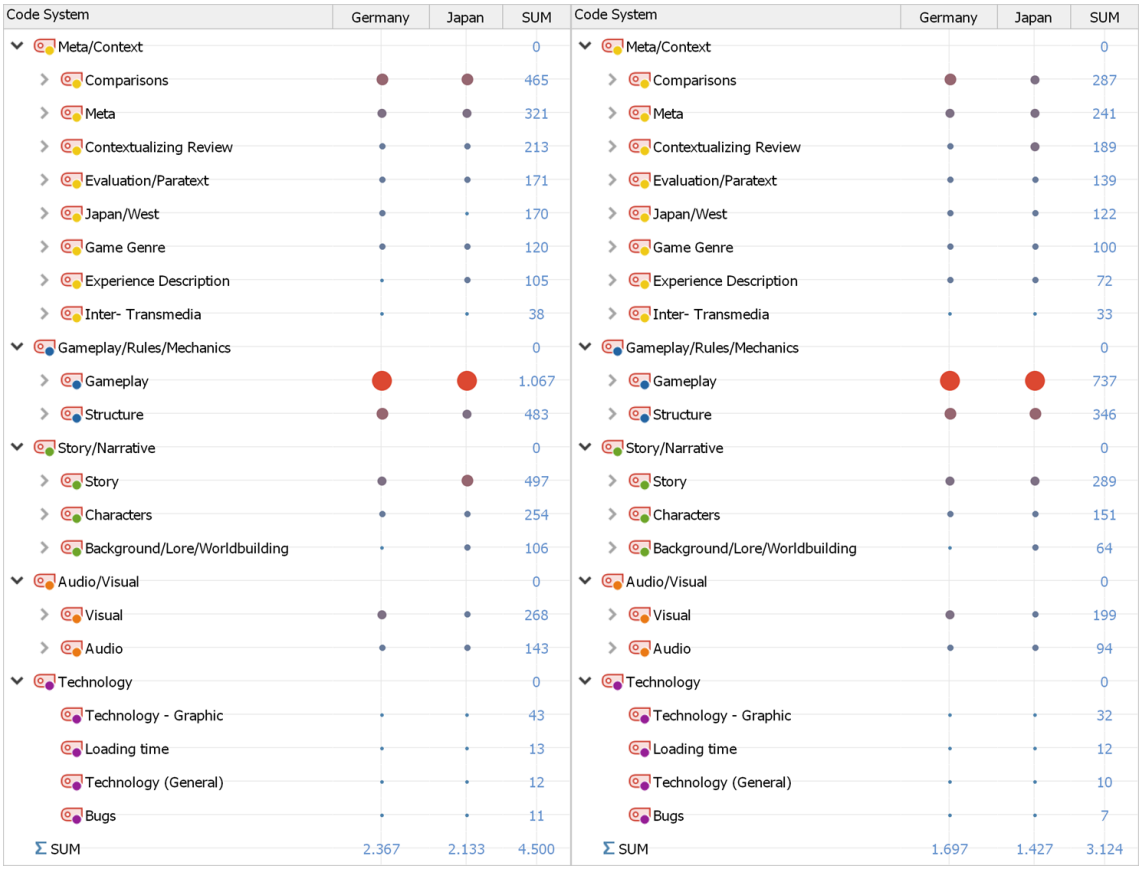


Figure 29 Total code frequencies of codes for the first level of sub-categories (left) and sub-categories with code frequencies counted once per document (right)

Figure 29 depicts the frequency of the next-lower level of codes. The high frequency of codes in the sub-category *Gameplay* for both document sets stands out. By examining the codes on this level, the central role of a game's mechanics and systems in its overall discussion becomes apparent. In contrast, the category *Technology* is the least frequently coded category in the German and Japanese document set. The most coded sub-category here is the category of

Technology – Graphic, conceptionally close to the *Visual* sub-category. Within the examined reviews, comparatively little space was allocated towards discussing the technological dimension of digital games. The total number of codes is however also highly dependent on the structure of a review and the concrete way of how it is written. The right side of Figure 29 depicts the same categories, with each code only being counted once per document.

As each document presents one review, written by one reviewer, counting codes only once per document limits the influence of repetitions and complexly structured text. The following is an example taken from a German review on the game Final Fantasy XV. User reviews analyzed in the qualitative analysis are referred to by an ID. A list of all user reviews in the qualitative corpus, sorted by ID, is included in Appendix B-1. All excerpts are provided in the original language in italics with the English translation by the author below.

D_Rev_048: *Und beim Stichwort Story beginnt auch der Hauptkritikpunkt des Spiels. Auch wenn sich hinter der vorhandenen Story des Spiels ein sehr gutes Konzept mit interessanten Charakteren, einer nicht unbedingt innovativen, aber dennoch bewährten Prämisse (böses böses Imperium greift an) und ineinander verwobenen Handlungssträngen steht, so ist die Präsentation all dieser Dinge enttäuschend. […] Auch gameplaytechnisch macht das Spiel hier einen herben Einschnitt: Es gibt keine offene Welt mehr, stattdessen schmeißt das Spiel den Spieler von einem Ort zum nächsten. Ich möchte nicht zu viel ins Detail gehen, um Spoiler zu vermeiden, jedoch wird ein überwiegender Großteil dessen, was zu Anfang des Spiels wie eine Einführung in eine große Story mit vielen Twists wirkt, über Bord geworfen.*

And with the keyword story, the main point of critic on the game begins. Even if a very good concept with interesting characters, a not really innovative, but still proven (evil evil [sic] empire attacks) premise and interwoven plotlines is behind the story of the game, the presentation of all these still disappoints. […] Also, gameplaywise, the game makes a stark cut: There is no open world anymore, instead, the player is thrown from one place to the next. I do not want to go into too much detail, to avoid spoilers, but a vast part of what seemed in the beginning a great story with many twists is thrown overboard.

In this text, for instance, the first sentence mentions the story of the game in broad terms and indicates it to be the main target of criticism Accordingly, *Negative* and *Story (overall)* codes were assigned here. The next sentence is more complex, it begins with positive remarks on several topics, including characters being interesting and interwoven plotlines. *Positive* codes are assigned here in conjunction with codes belonging to the sub-categories *Characters*, and *Story*. Within the sentence however, the parenthesis "not really innovative" negatively touches upon the originality of the story. As such, while this parenthesis is coded as *Negative*, the surrounding sentence is coded as *Positive*. The sentence ends with a criticism of how the elements mentioned above are presented within the game. After this comes more detailed criticism of the way the story is presented, abbreviated in this example, followed by short criticism on the game's underlying structure. This is again followed by criticism of story elements.

This small excerpt of a longer review (see Appendix B-2) showcases the advantage of counting codes once per document. User reviews, albeit they are often well-structured and concise, are still non-standardized texts written by a wide range of people in different styles. Their textual structure makes it necessary to utilize a highly flexible system of codes, that can adopt to condensed meaningful short sentences warranting the assignment of several different codes, just as well as to relatively unstructured paragraphs of several sentences, touching upon a single topic in a more unconcise manner. Parentheses, digressions and other stylistic characteristics occasionally necessitate the splitting of coded segments of text, that would otherwise be counted only once. A once-per-document count limits the influence of this and arguably more clearly reflects the overall allocation of coded segments within the code system.

The differences between overall code frequency and code frequency counted one per document in Figure 29 however appear small. This hints at the robustness and saturated state of the code system. In Figure 30, the overall code frequency is shown on the left and the code frequency for codes counted once per document is shown on the right. The size of the circles here is calculated per row, so for example in both cases, text segments were more frequently coded *Positive* in the German, than in the Japanese document set. In the German set, in total 553 segments were coded as *Positive*, while 486 were coded so in the Japanese set. When counted once per document, 141 German and 127 documents included at least on text segment coded as *Positive*. While more segments were coded *Positive* in the German reviews, than in the Japanese document set, the reverse is true for the code *Negative*, which is more frequent in the *Japanese* corpus, whether counted in total or once per document. Although the frequency of

codes should not be understood as a quantitative measurement reflecting the overall distribution of codes in the population of all user reviews, it does already hint at a more critical view on the selected games by Japanese players. The higher frequency of codes in the category *Story/Narrative* in the Japanese document set also confirms to observations that Japanese players tend to place a comparatively greater focus on story elements in their evaluation of games (Zagal and Tomuro 2013; cf. Brückner et al. 2019).

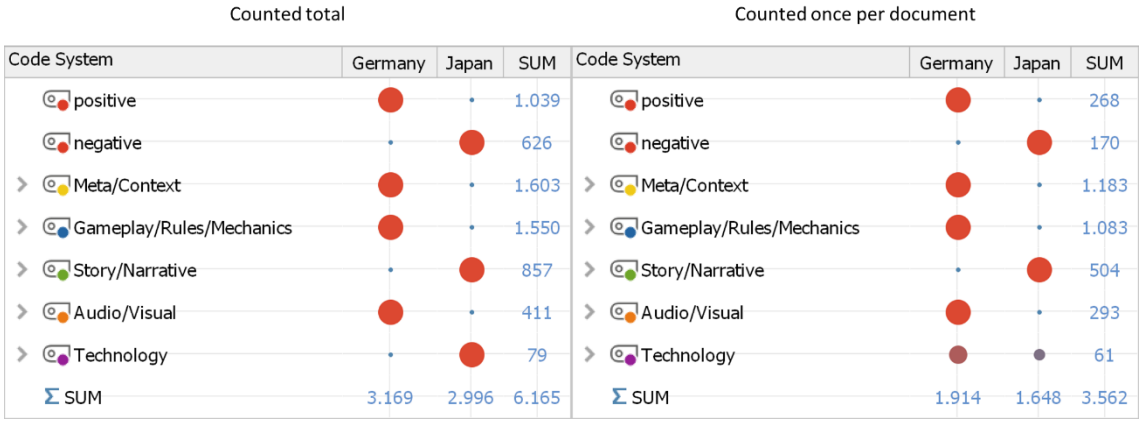


Figure 30 Total code frequencies (left) and code frequencies for codes counted once per document (right). The size of the circles is calculated per row, for a comparison of the German and Japanese document sets

The only category where the tendency of code distribution changes by altering the method of counting is the category *Technology*. This is related to the overall low number of codes in this category. If counted once per document, 31 segments were coded in this category in the German and 30 in the Japanese document set, showing a relatively even number of codes in this category between the German and Japanese reviews.

Counting each code only once per document, creates however also potential problems. A high frequency of text segments coded within the sub-category *Story* is for example not necessarily evidence of an unstructured review. Often, it simply shows that the reviewer discusses the story at greater length or mentions it more frequently, which can be understood as a sign of the importance of the category on a game's overall evaluation. In general, total code frequencies are therefore a more expressive, measurement and are used more extensively in this thesis. They have however also been compared to frequencies counted once per document, and where applicable, differences are indicated.

The overall distribution and frequency of codes outlined above does provide some insights into the structure of user reviews and their thematic breadth. User reviews frequently touch upon all dimensions of professional reviews, identified by Zagal et al. (2009), while often including

contextual information on how the reviewed game was played, for example for how long or by using what kind of external resources. A detailed explanation of each code is outside the scope of this thesis, but the full code system, including code frequencies and memos to describe each code, is attached in the appendix (see Appendix A-2 and A-3). Below, the second-level categories and selected codes are examined, to provide an insight into which topics are discussed in the user reviews.

The category *Meta/Context* consists of eight sub-categories (see Figure 31). The most frequently coded sub-category is *Comparisons*. Within this category fall comparisons of the reviewed game to other games or media. This is a frequently found practice within the game user reviews. As many of the selected games are part of a larger franchise or series, an especially salient form of comparison is the comparison to prior entries into the series or other games by the same developer. More than half of the codes within this sub-category (254 of 465) are coded in respect to such comparisons.

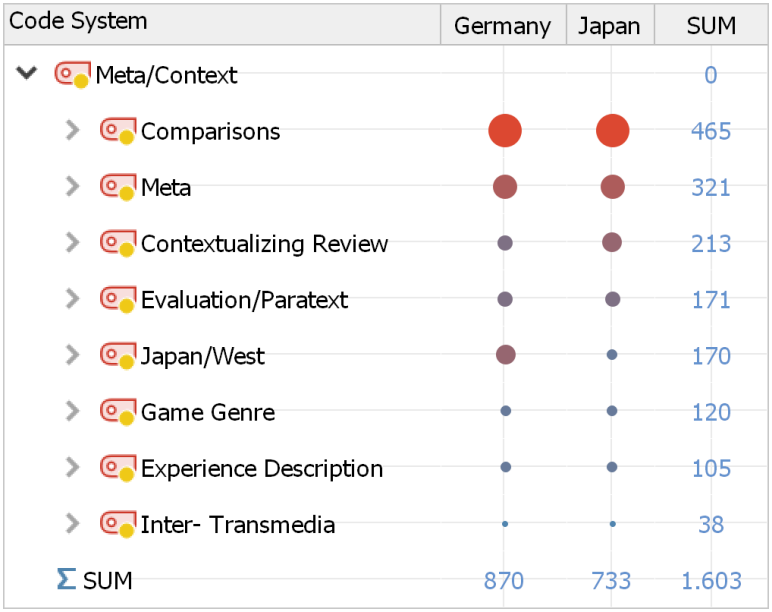


Figure 31 Sub-Categories of the Meta/Context category with total code frequencies

The next sub-category by the frequency of coded segments is the sub-category *Meta*. This category subsumes text segments written in concern to the contextual factors of a game, for example its developer, platform or hardware. Aside from this, it also subsumes codes discussing games on a meta level, such as discussions on what makes a game a "game", on games as a medium, or on their innovativeness. Expressed feelings of nostalgia in concern to the reviewed game, frequently mentioned by German reviewers, are also sorted into this sub-category.

The sub-category *Contextualizing Review* consists of remarks by the reviewer, that provide context to the review. It consists of five codes. (1) Self descriptions of the reviewer, for example in concern to their age, sex or usual playing habits. Often mentioned is whether the reviewer is new to or longtime fan of the series or franchise of the reviewed game, (2) an estimate of how long the game was played at the point of writing the review, (3) descriptions of the concrete expectations that were associated with a game before playing, (4) the reason for purchasing a game, and (5) the concrete reason for writing the review.

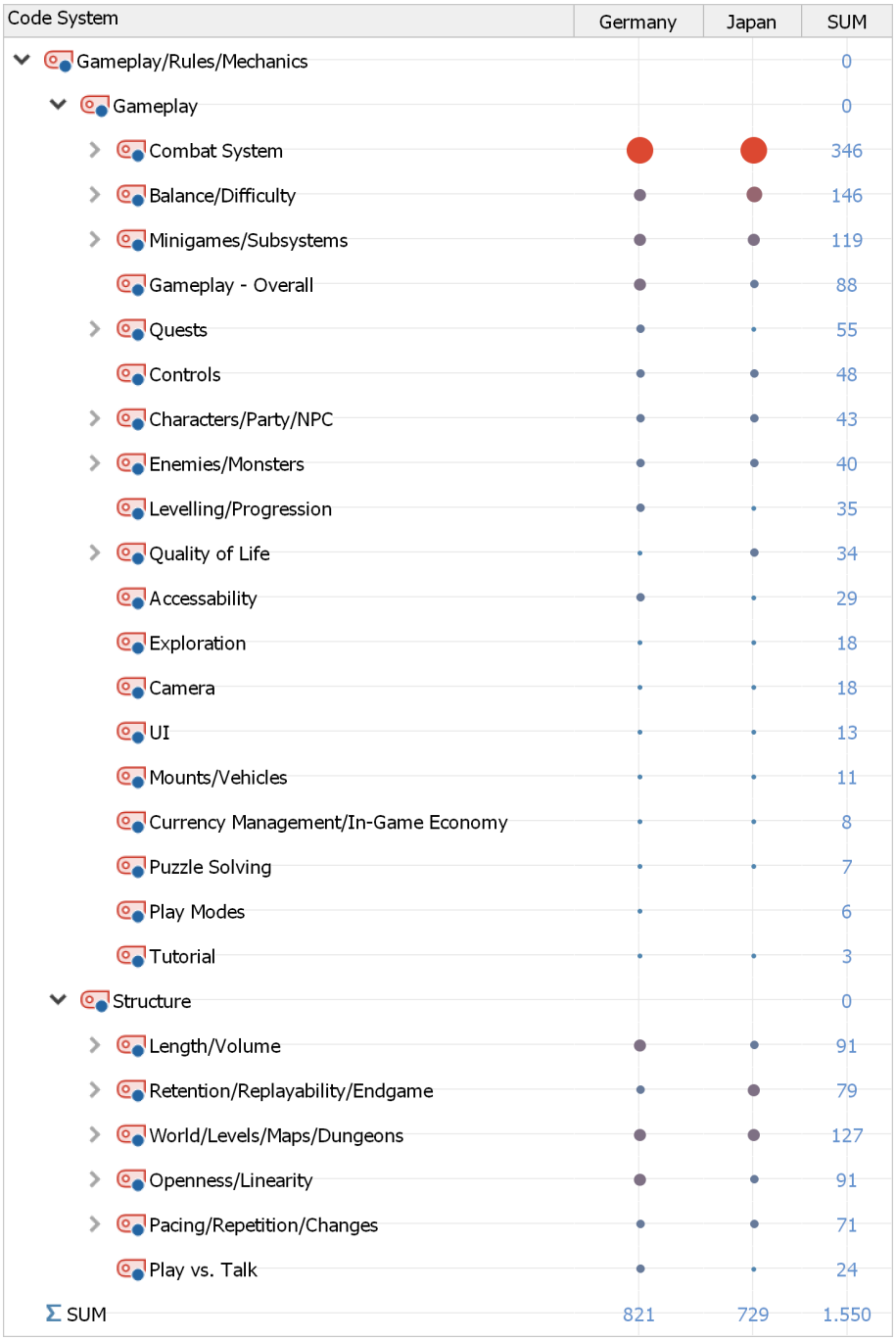
The sub-category *Evaluation/Paratext*[22], is named for its inclusion of advice to other players and the common direct address of the readers of the review. It consists of three codes. *Locating Audience* subsumes all mentions of who would enjoy the game. For example, the following text segment by a German reviewer of the Game Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (FromSoftware 2019) falls under this code: "Who enjoys hard challenges will have great fun with this game" (D_Rev_177). *Branding* subsumes codes of text segments, discussing what constitutes the core or main elements of a game franchise and relate this to the reviewed game. For example, the following sentence from a Japanese reviewer of the game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is coded here. "There are people who defend [the game] by saying that 'it is a common characteristic for Zelda games to have no real story' but that is not completely true" (J_Rev_206). Lastly, *Purchase Recommendation* subsumes text segments in which the reviewer recommends or argues against purchasing a game.

The sub-category *Japan/West* includes all mentions in the corpus pertaining to (1) the "Japaneseness" of the reviewed games, (2) their localization and (3) discussions of the differences between Japanese and Western games or players. Codes for "Japaneseness" are divided into the discussion of a game's contents, its mechanics, its setting, its art style and its regional provenance. The sub-category *Game Genre* includes 16 codes of comparatively high granularity. The codes are demarcations of linking the reviewed game to a particular genre. For example, the code *Genre – ARPG* marks text segments in which the reviewed game or parts of it were framed as an Action-Roleplaying Game (ARPG).

Experience Description is again a broader sub-category, encompassing direct descriptions of a player's experience with a game. This includes text segments that indicate high immersion or the reaching of a flow state, describe a "sense of accomplishment" associated with the game or

[22] For a more extensive discussion of the concept of paratext in respect to games, see Consalvo (2017).

the experience of computer vision syndrome or “3d yoi”, commonly translated into English as simulator sickness or game induced motion sickness. Lastly, the sub-category *Inter-Transmedia* signifies text segments, that touch upon the connection of a game to its predecessors or other forms of media, for example through shared characters or other narrative elements.



Code System	Germany	Japan	SUM
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics			0
Gameplay			0
Combat System			346
Balance/Difficulty			146
Minigames/Subsystems			119
Gameplay - Overall			88
Quests			55
Controls			48
Characters/Party/NPC			43
Enemies/Monsters			40
Levelling/Progression			35
Quality of Life			34
Accessability			29
Exploration			18
Camera			18
UI			13
Mounts/Vehicles			11
Currency Management/In-Game Economy			8
Puzzle Solving			7
Play Modes			6
Tutorial			3
Structure			0
Length/Volume			91
Retention/Replayability/Endgame			79
World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons			127
Openness/Linearity			91
Pacing/Repetition/Changes			71
Play vs. Talk			24
Σ SUM	821	729	1.550

Figure 32 Sub-categories and codes of the Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics category with total code frequencies

Figure 32 depicts the two sub-categories of *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*, *Gameplay* and *Structure*. *Gameplay* subsume all codes in relation to the concrete mechanics of a game, most

dominantly for the selected games in this thesis, their combat systems. This includes amongst others the difficulty level of a game, potential subsystems or minigames, discussions of "quests", that is missions in the game, that players can complete to receive rewards, or the game's controls.

While *Gameplay* subsumes codes on the mechanics with which players directly interact, *Structure* refers to the underlying boundaries, shaping the way players interact with games. This includes for example the very concrete limitations of time and space, i.e. the length of a game and the limitations of its game world. It also includes comments on the pace of the game and the amount of freedom, attributed to the player. German players more frequently mention for example quests, or the length of a game, while Japanese players mention a game's replayability or its difficulty.

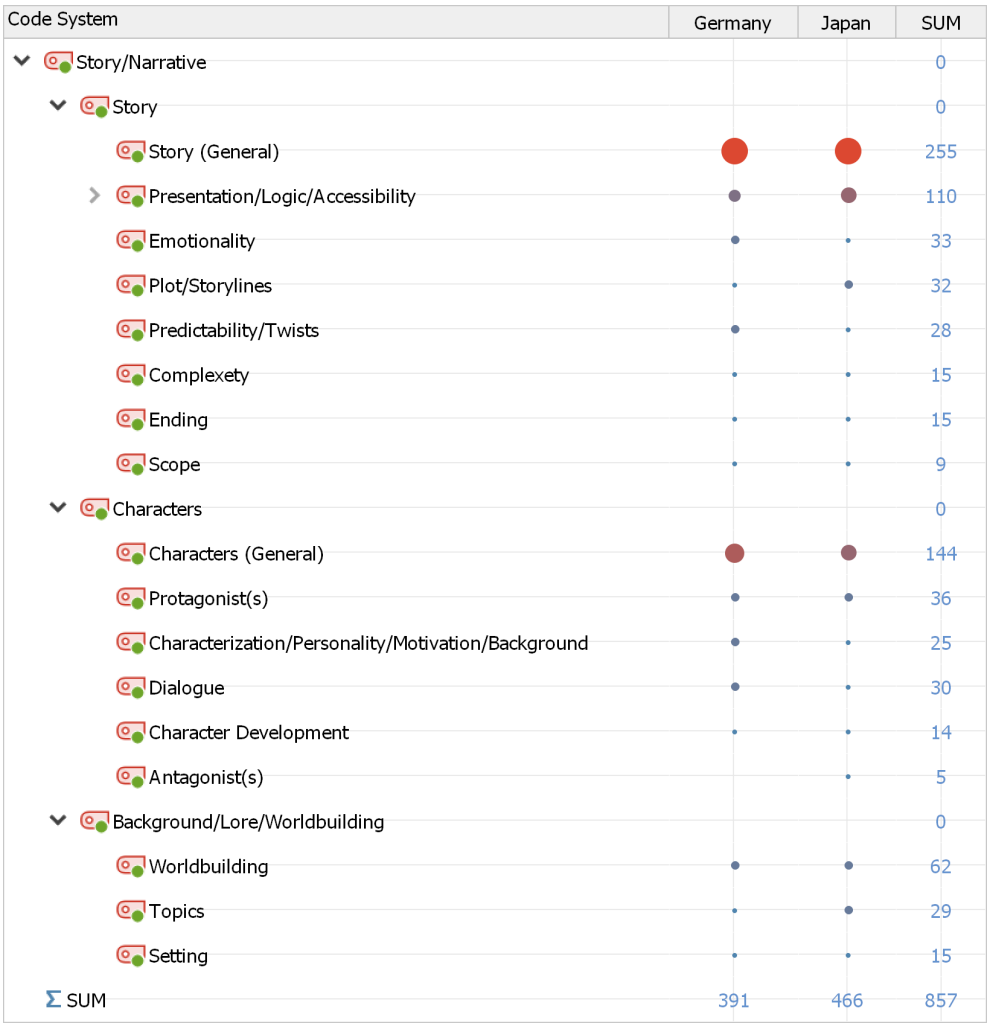


Figure 33 Sub-categories and codes of the Story/Narrative category with total code frequencies

The sub-categories and codes for the category *Story/Narrative* are depicted in Figure 33. The category consists of three conceptionally distinct sub-categories: *Story*, *Characters*, and

Background/Lore/Worldbuilding. *Story* subsumes all codes directed at the overall narrative of a game, basically its story elements. *Characters* includes all codes related to the characters of a game on a narrative level, for example their personalities or content of their dialogue. Lastly, *Background/Lore/Worldbuilding* refers to the story relevant background information of, and topics discussed within a game.

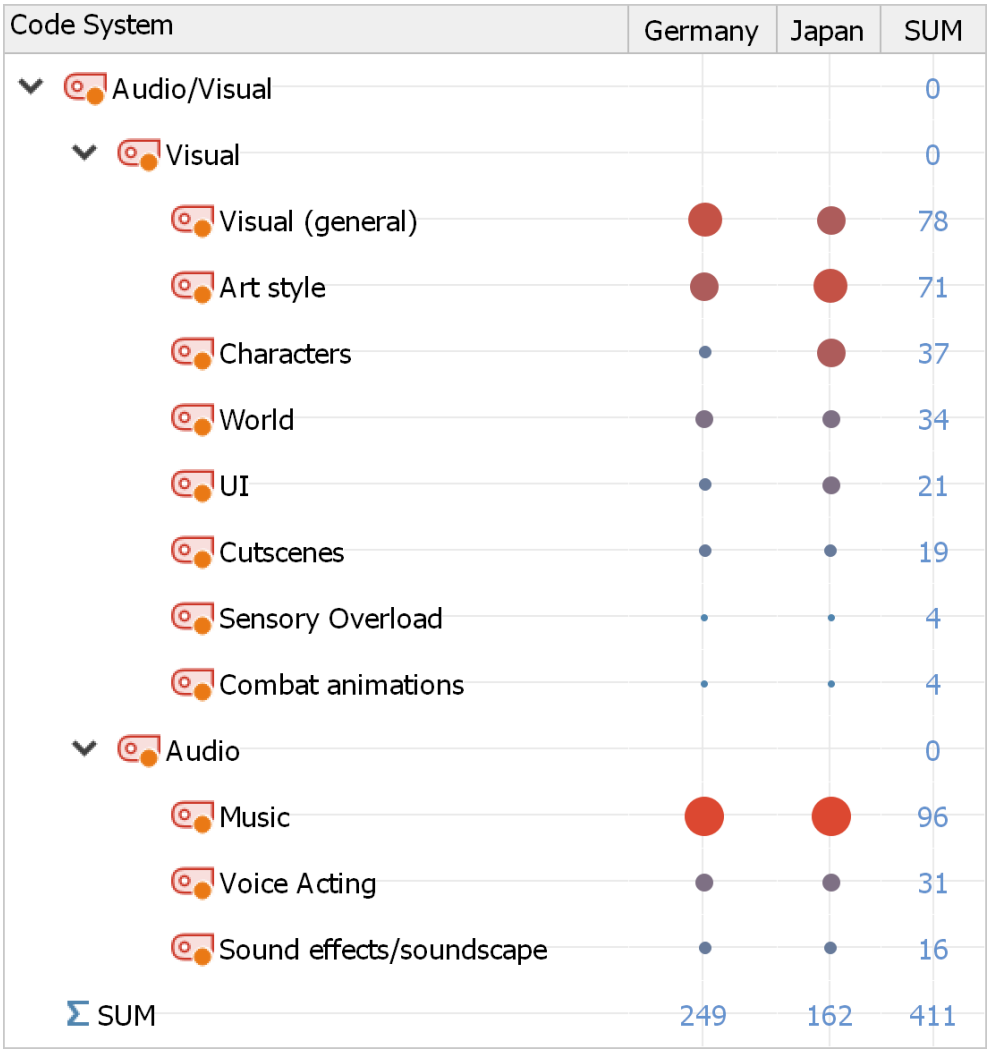


Figure 34 Sub-categories and codes of the Audio-Visual category with total code frequencies

The category *Audio/Visual* is comprised of the sub-categories *Visual* and *Audio* (see Figure 34). All text segments touching upon a game's aesthetics are coded within this category. This includes mentions of the overall art style, the artistic depiction of characters, the art style of the world, the user interface (UI), cutscenes, the game's soundtrack and sound effects, as well as the voice acting. Mentions of characters' looks and artistic styles appear more frequent in the Japanese document set.

Lastly, the category *Technology* consists of four sub-categories (see Figure 35). The most frequently coded sub-category, *Technology – Graphic*, represents text segments that discuss the technological aspects of a game's graphics, predominantly framerates and texture qualities. *Loading Time* includes all segments mentioning the loading time of game's, while *Bugs* subsumes text segments written in concern to technical problems within the games, colloquially called bugs. The sub-category *Technology (General)* includes all remarks made on the technology of a game in a very general way, that does not fall into the other sub-categories. For example, a German reviewer's description of the game Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen as being "technologically antiquated" falls into this sub-category.

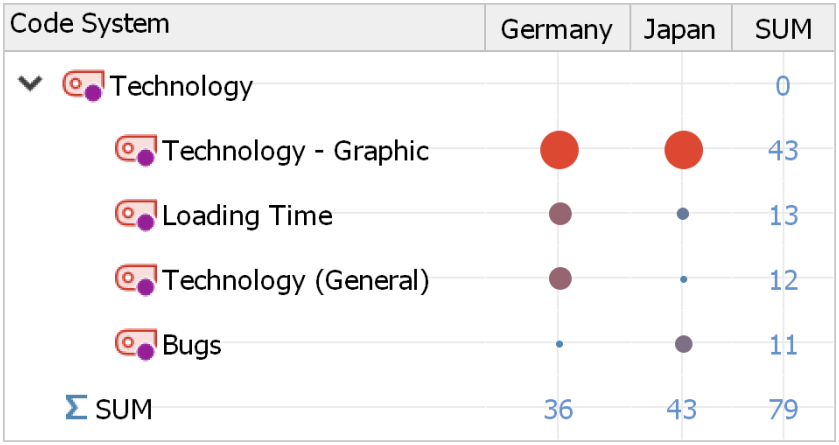


Figure 35 Sub-categories and codes of the Technology category with total code frequencies

A comprehensive examination of the categories, sub-categories and codes reveals common patterns between the German and Japanese document sets in respect to the breath of topics touched upon in the reviews, as well as to their respective frequency. In both, the German and the Japanese document set, the order of categories by frequency of coded segments is the same. Most codes are assigned to the category *Meta/Context*, closely followed by *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*. In both document groups, approximately 70 percent of all thematic codes (Germany: 71 percent, Japan: 69 percent) were sorted into these categories. This is followed by *Story/Narrative*, *Audio/Visual* and *Technology*. The high frequency of codes in the first two thematic categories is also reflected by a greater number of sub-categories and codes. This hints at the games being discussed more deeply in concern to their core elements of gameplay and mechanics than on any other element of a game and holds true across both document sets.

The category *Story/Narrative* is the only category with a comparatively higher frequency of codes in the Japanese, than in the German document set (see Figure 30). This is true across all

sub-categories of this category as well and indicates a higher focus on story elements when reviewing games among Japanese, than among German players. Furthermore, in the Japanese document set, the visual design of in-game characters is comparatively more frequently coded than in the German document set (see Figure 34). Other differences in the frequency of coded segments across the document sets are less salient.

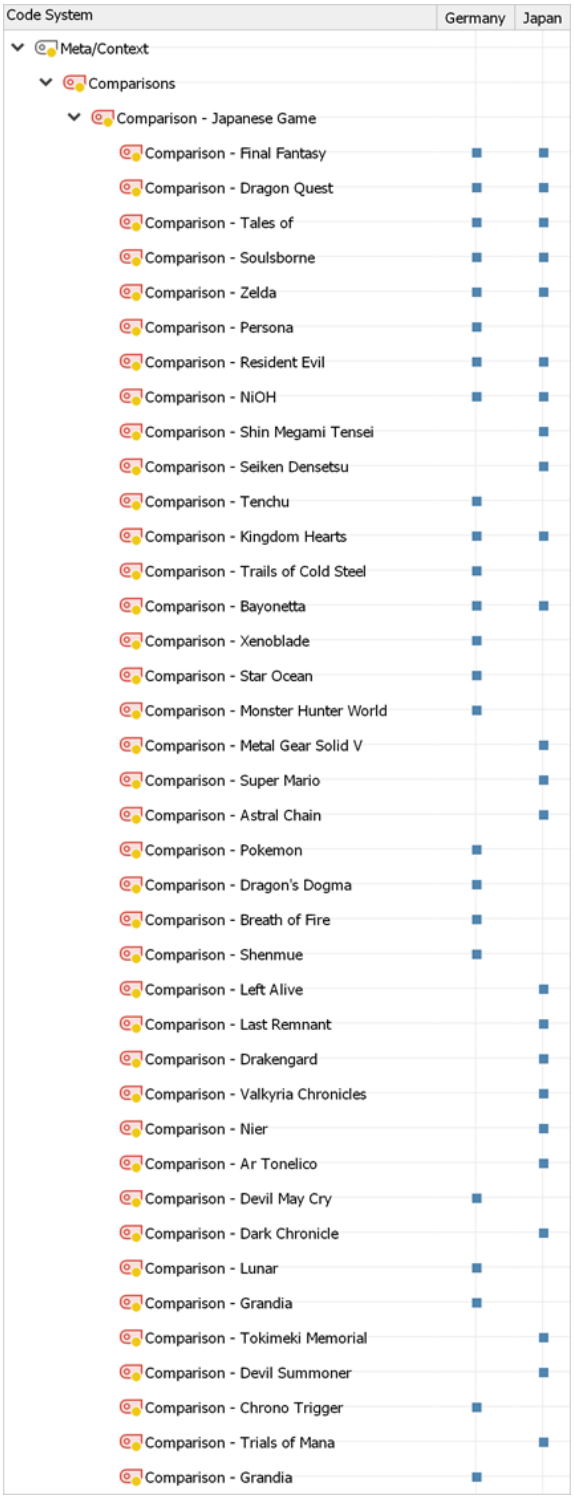


Figure 36 Codes for comparing the reviewed game to Japanese games, with binarized frequency

While code frequencies are useful to structure and visualize the meanings behind the coded text segments, it is hard to compare them across the document sets. One comparison that can however be made, is that of examining which topics or codes solely appear within one of the document sets, but not the other. The omission of topics is potentially one of the most easily spotted differences in the analysis of user reviews. Within this corpus, such differences were mainly evident in the category *Meta/Context* in codes of high granularity, most prominently in the sub-category *Comparisons*. *Comparison* consists of the codes *Comparison – Predecessor*, *Comparison – Japanese Games*, *Comparison – Western Games*, *Comparison – Other Media*, *Comparison – Types of Games* and *Comparison – Chinese games*. Figure 36 depicts the detailed list of sub-codes for *Comparison – Japanese Games*. Code frequencies are binarized for each document set, meaning that the square mark indicates that at least one text segment within the document group was coded with the specific code. No square means that no text segment in the document group was coded with the specific code. Note that comparisons to a reviewed game's franchise's prior entries are not included here. These are sorted into *Comparison – Predecessor*. By examining *Comparison – Japanese Games*, it is evident that various Japanese games or game franchises are used as a frame of reference to discuss the reviewed game. This is true for both, German and Japanese reviewers. In total, 39 Japanese games or game franchises were used as object of comparison. A close examination of Figure 36 does however also reveal, that while comparisons to Japanese games or game franchises are common among German and Japanese users, there exists a difference in which games are concretely used.

For this sample of user reviews, 15 of 39 games/franchises were solely mentioned by German reviewers, while another 15 were only mentioned by Japanese reviewers. Only nine games/franchises were mentioned in both document sets. These tend to be currently (and historically) popular franchises, such as Square Enix's Final Fantasy or Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda. While these sub-codes are not necessarily saturated, and more games and franchises are likely to be uncovered in both document groups if more data is analyzed, it does point towards a divergence in what games are used as a frame of reference when reviewing a game. The high frequency of Japanese game franchises mentioned by the German players showcases the strong presence of Japanese games in the German market. Albeit that the frequency of Japanese games mentioned by German reviewers is related to them reviewing Japanese games, the discrepancy between the mentioned games reflects differences in the respective national or (sub-)cultural game canons.

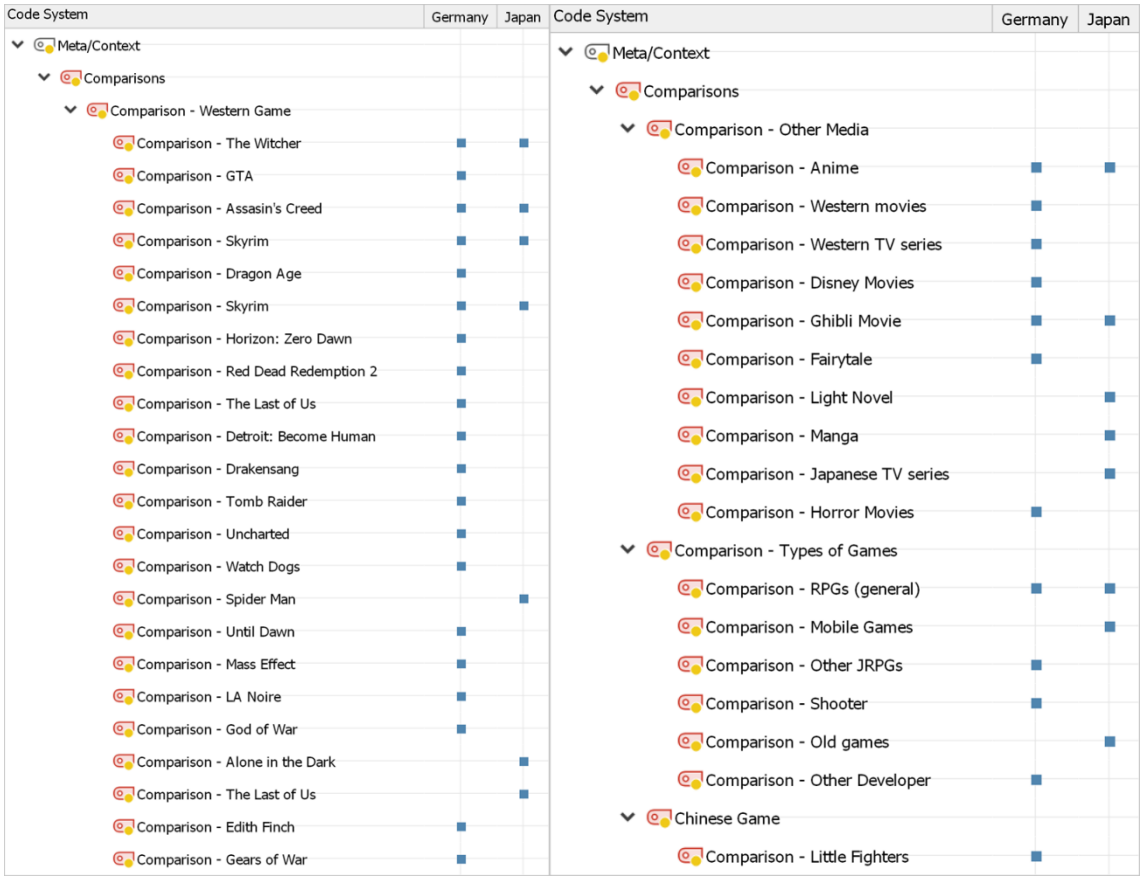


Figure 37 Codes for comparisons to Western games, games in general, Chinese games and other media, with binarized frequencies

Figure 37 depicts the binarized frequencies of codes for the codes *Comparison – Western Games*, *Comparison – Other Media, Comparison – Type of Game* and *Comparison – Chinese Game*. Different from the comparison to Japanese games, comparisons to Western games appear far more frequent in the German reviews. Of 23 games and franchises, four were mentioned in both document sets, three were only mentioned in the Japanese document set, while 16 were solely mentioned in the German document set. Again, this hints more strongly towards differences in the frame of reference, that the reviewed games are compared to. The more frequent and more varied comparisons to Western games in the German document set are an expression of different media consumption practices and potentially different accessibility of media between the regions. The comparisons in the *Comparison – Other Media* codes also indicate this. Games are not only compared to other games, but also to different forms of media and media contents. While both, German and Japanese reviewers, draw comparisons between the selected games and Japanese anime, only Japanese reviewers mentioned media such as "light novels", manga or Japanese TV dramas. On the other hand, German users compared the

games or their content to Western movies or TV series but also, in case of the game Ni no Kuni II, to fairytales.

To a lesser degree, such a difference is also evident in the sub-category *Game Genre* (see Figure 38). The variety of codes here is more limited than in the *Comparisons* sub-category. One difference is the inclusion of "*gyaruge*", an abbreviation of the world "*gyaru gēmu*", itself taken from the (non-existent) English term "gal game". *Gyaruge* are a genre of games focused on interacting and realizing a relationship with attractive anime characters within the game world. While such games are also increasingly found in the West, for example on Steam, the genre stems from and is far more pervasive in Japan. Interestingly, the same can arguably be said of the Visual Novel genre, which was however only mentioned in the German reviews. "Brawler" is used exclusively in German reviews to refer to the combat elements of the game Yakuza 0. In the same context, the game is referred to as an action game in the Japanese reviews.

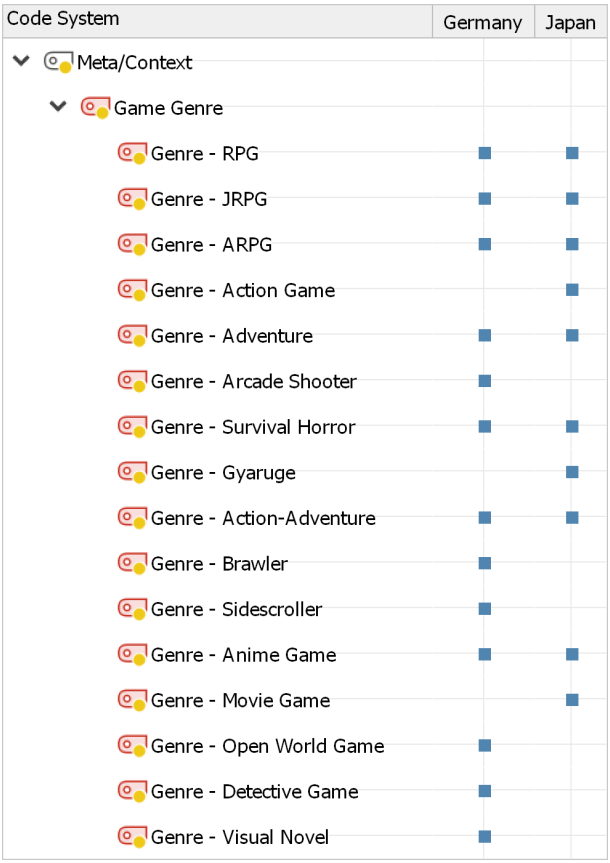


Figure 38 Codes for demarcating a game as belonging to, or containing elements of, a specific genre, with binarized frequencies

Another, not surprising, difference in topics discussed is apparent in the sub-category *Japan/West* (see Figure 39). The codes related to *Localization* generally fall into two categories. One is evident only in the German document set, complaints on the lack of a German language

translation or voiceover. Several of the selected games were released in Germany only in an English version or only with translated texts and no German voice actors. The second concerns the range of language options available in a game. While this is mostly coded for German reviews, describing whether they prefer the Japanese or English voice acting for a game, one Japanese review mention this for the game Persona 5 (J_Rev_071). The reviewer professes to prefer the English voice actors, as they sound "cooler" and wanted the option to switch to the English version, which is impossible in the Japanese version of the game.

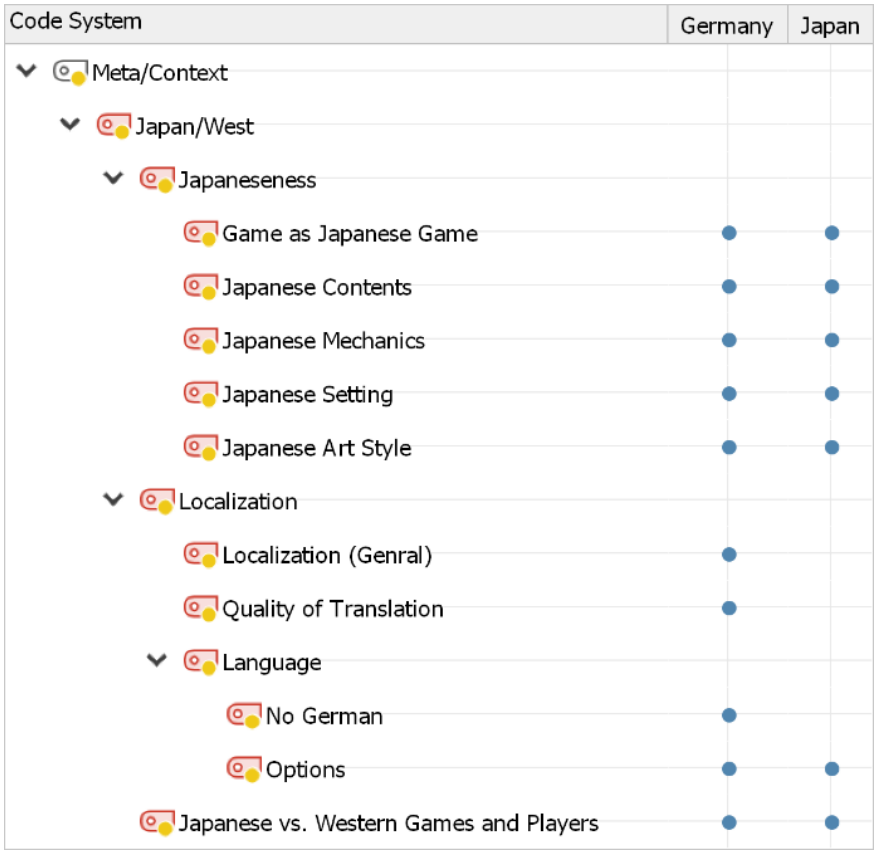


Figure 39 Codes related to the Japan/West dichotomy and differences between Japanese and Western games and players, with binarized frequencies

Curiously, some codes within the sub-category Japan/West were more frequently coded within the Japanese document set. Figure 40 depicts the code frequencies for the codes in the sub-category, counted once per document. The size of the circles is calculated per row. The codes *Game as Japanese Game* and *Japanese vs. Western Games and Players* are more frequently coded in the Japanese document set than in the German one. The former code is attributed to text segments that emphasize the origin of the game as being Japan. The latter includes explicit discussions on differences between Japanese and Western games and players. In contrast, the *Japaneseness* of Japanese games in concern to their contents, mechanics, setting and art style are more elaborately discussed in the German reviews.

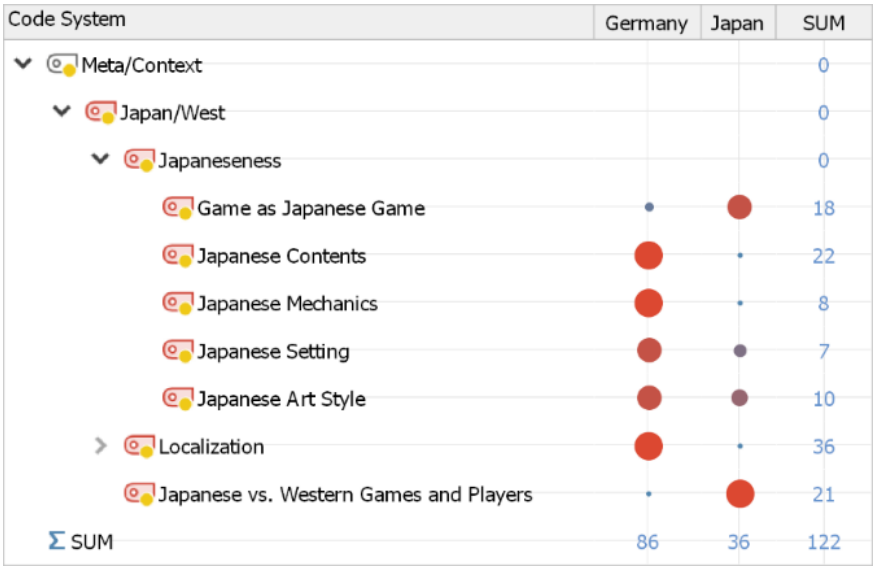


Figure 40 Code frequencies, counted once per document for the Japan/West sub-category, with the size of the circles calculated by row

In conclusion, German and Japanese user reviews written in concern to the selected games show great similarities in their overall structure, i.e. the space they allot to the discussion of specific aspects of a game. They generally discuss the same topics in largely similar proportions. Differences in the relative frequency of codes within the document sets on the level of the thematic categories are evident in concern to the sentiment markers and the frequency of text segments, coded with codes belonging to the category *Story/Narrative*. This implies first, that the Japanese reviews in this corpus discuss the selected games more negatively than the German reviews and second, that they allocate more space to the discussion of a game's story and narrative elements. This does conform to prior studies, hinting at a greater importance of story elements to Japanese reviewers in their overall evaluation of games (Brückner et al. 2019; Zagal and Tomuro 2013). The most salient differences observed concern the concrete media to which the reviewed games are compared. This hints at different frames of reference, and therefore also different scales of evaluation, when playing, experiencing and reviewing a game. Overall, user reviews are rich sources discussing various elements of the player experience, albeit they are sometimes limited in depth and written after play.

4.1.2 Code Relations

As shown in the previous section, the themes present and the relative length at which they are discussed is highly similar between the German and Japanese document sets. To uncover potential differences in German and Japanese player's experiences of the selected games, a more differentiated analysis is necessary. While section 4.1.3 provides a more detailed look at

German and Japanese reviews on a level of high granularity by providing examples of close readings, this section examines differences in how the categories and codes uncovered through the analysis are related to each other.

The interrelation of categories and codes can be examined on different levels. Figure 41 depicts a code matrix of the German (top) and Japanese (bottom) document sets. The code matrix includes the *Positive* and *Negative* sentiment markers and the top-level thematic categories. The interrelation between codes within a document set is represented by the size of the circles. Interrelation is calculated based on the frequency of the same text segment being coded with codes belonging to two categories. By far the most frequent overlap occurs between the sentiment markers and the thematic categories. The most frequent intersection between thematic categories in both sets is between *Meta/Context* and *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*, (German: 107, Japan: 84). In the German set, this is followed by the overlap between the categories *Meta/Context* and *Audio/Visual* (48), while the next frequent overlap in the Japanese set is tied between *Story/Narrative* and *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* (38) and *Story/Narrative* and *Meta/Context* (also 38). This is a direct result of the higher frequency of text segments coded in the *Story/Narrative* category in the Japanese document set.

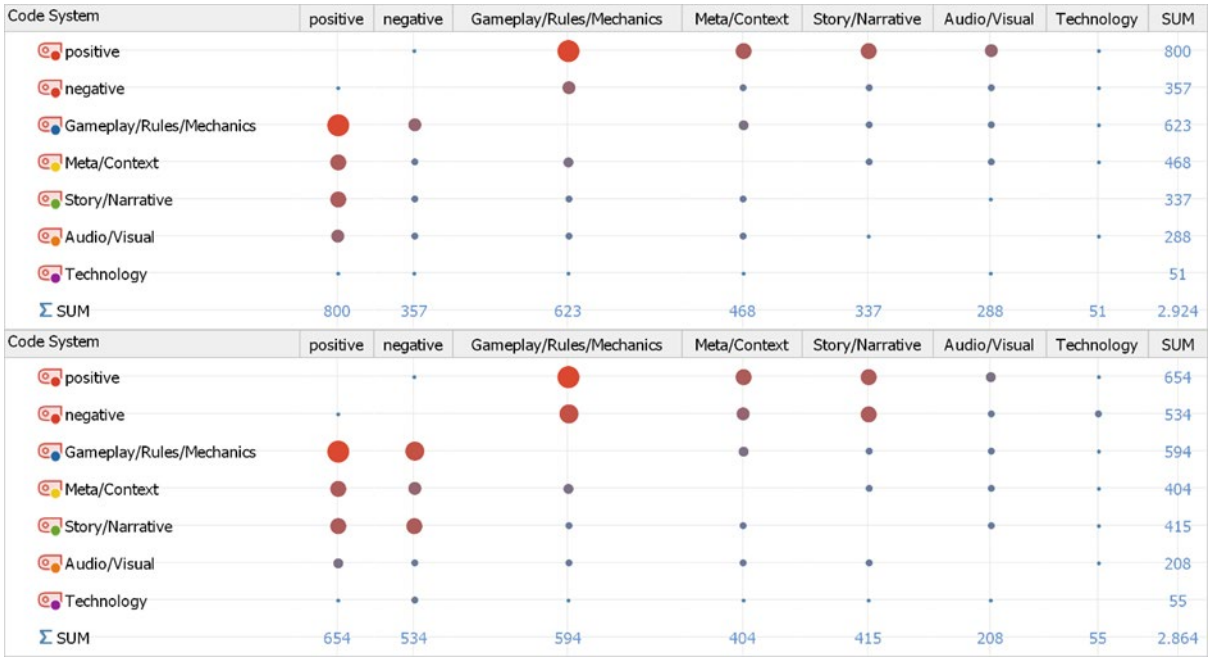


Figure 41 Code matrix, depicting the intersection between sentiment markers and top-level categories for the German (top) and Japanese (bottom) document sets, with larger circles representing a higher frequency of code intersections within the document set

The sentiment markers *Positive* and *Negative* make it possible to easily visualize the context in which other codes were coded. *Positive* refers here generally to text segment with positive

connotations such as praise, contentment or elation, while *Negative* refers to text segments with negative connotations, such as criticism, disappointment, anger or discontent. In general, a higher frequency of *Negative* codes is observed in the Japanese document set but not across all games in the corpus.

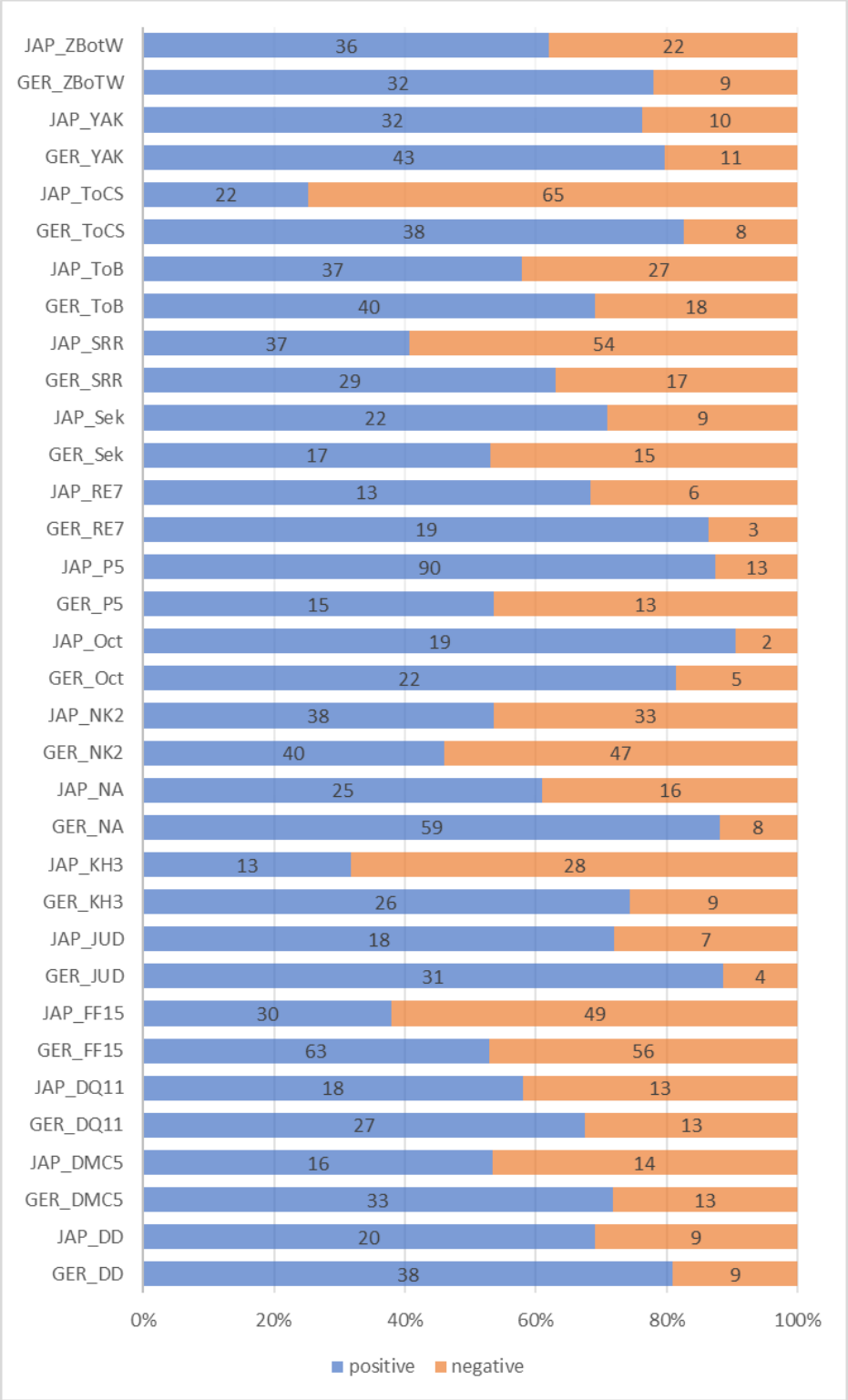


Figure 42 Frequency of Positive and Negative codes per game and document set

Figure 42 shows the allocation of *Positive* and *Negative* markers per game and document set. While overall, more text segments in the Japanese reviews were coded *Negative* than in the German reviews, this is not true for all games within the corpus. The games Persona 5, Octopath Traveler, Sekiro and Ni no Kuni II show a higher number of *Positive* coded segments in the Japanese, than in the German document set. The most eye-catching difference is however arguably the allocations of codes for the games Trails of Cold Steel 1 and 2 (here subsumed under ToCS[23]), Kingdom Hearts III, Shining Resonance Refrain and Final Fantasy XV. For each of these games, the percentage of *Positive* codes is considerably higher in the German, than in the Japanese document set. This conforms to the overall Amazon Rating of each game (see Appendix C-1), indicating the validity of the coding method, and hints at different meso-level player cultures being represented in those reviews.

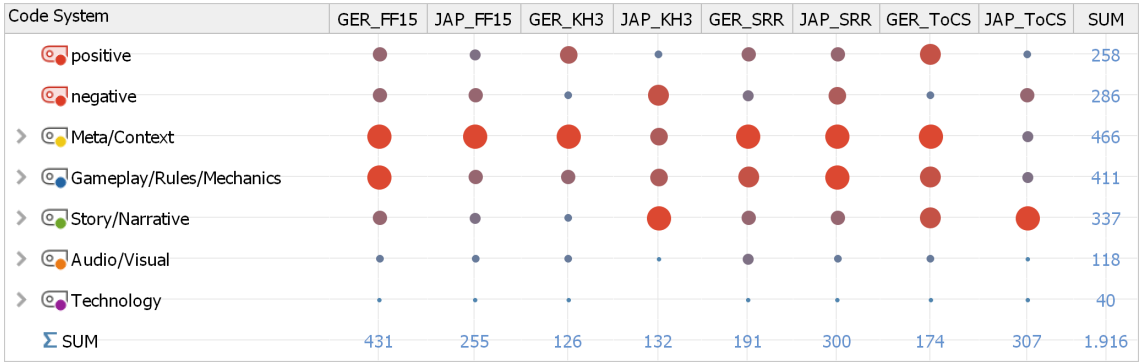
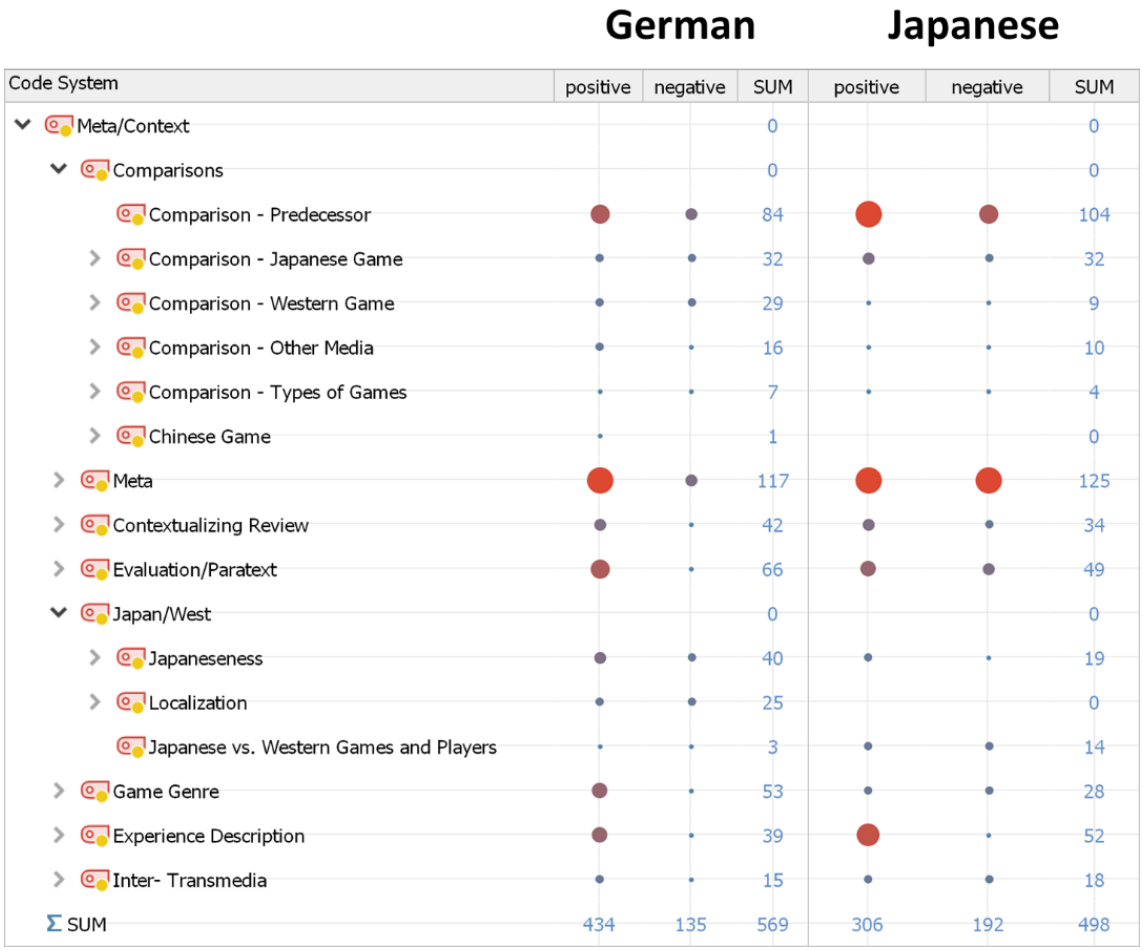


Figure 43 Code frequencies for top-level categories of four games, with the size of the circles being calculated per column, i.e. per document group

In Figure 43, these games are more closely examined through an overview of the frequency of codes on the level of thematic categories and sentiment markers. Especially for Kingdom Hearts III and ToCS, an interesting pattern emerges. The Japanese frequency of segments coded as *Negative* is higher than the German frequency, while the frequency of positively coded segments is far lower. Simultaneously, a high number of segments were coded in the category *Story/Narrative*, again hinting at the high importance of narrative elements on the overall evaluation of a game for Japanese players. The games Final Fantasy XV and Shining Resonance Refrain also show a significantly higher frequency of text segments coded *Negative*. However, in their case this is not accompanied by a noticeable increase in *Story/Narrative*

[23] The employed codes for ToCS1 and 2 are largely identical. This is based on ToCS2 being a direct sequel to ToCS1, with largely the same systems, mechanics and audio-visual elements (cf. Brückner et al. 2019). Many German and Japanese reviewers also do not strictly differentiate between the games. To simplify the presentation of results and the following discussion, ToCS1 and 2 are therefore subsumed under a ToCS document group.

codes. Instead, at least for Final Fantasy XV, the higher frequency of *Negative* codes is accompanied by a comparatively lower frequency of texts segments with codes in the category *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*.



Code System	German positive	German negative	German SUM	Japanese positive	Japanese negative	Japanese SUM
Meta/Context			0			0
Comparisons			0			0
Comparison - Predecessor			84			104
Comparison - Japanese Game			32			32
Comparison - Western Game			29			9
Comparison - Other Media			16			10
Comparison - Types of Games			7			4
Chinese Game			1			0
Meta			117			125
Contextualizing Review			42			34
Evaluation/Paratext			66			49
Japan/West			0			0
Japaneseness			40			19
Localization			25			0
Japanese vs. Western Games and Players			3			14
Game Genre			53			28
Experience Description			39			52
Inter- Transmedia			15			18
Σ SUM	434	135	569	306	192	498

Figure 44 Code matrix of the frequency of codes in the category Meta/Context intersecting with Positive or Negative coded segments per document set, size of circles is calculated per document set

Figure 44 depicts the frequency of intersections between *Positive* and *Negative* markers and the sub-categories within *Meta/Context* for all games. In the Japanese document set, a comparatively higher number of *Negative* and *Comparison – Predecessor* coded text segments coincide, indicating a negative comparison of the reviewed games to their predecessors. The comparatively high frequency of *Negative* codes in the sub-category *Meta* stands out but cannot be attributed towards a single code within this sub-category. A closer examination reveals however a high frequency of *Negative* codes, coinciding with the code *Ludo-Narrative*. Common criticisms described here can best be summarized as expressions of ludo-narrative dissonances (Hocking 2009), that is conflicts between the ludic elements of a game (i.e. its mechanics and systems) and its narrative. For example, one Japanese reviewer (J_Rev_066) of

the game Octopath Traveler mentions a feeling of "wrongness" (*iwakan*), after discovering a non-player character (NPC), selling items within the depths of one of the game's dungeons. Other reviewers mention for example gaps between the narrative and the gameplay of the game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

As mentioned above, the sub-category *Localization* is mostly unique to the German document set and generally codes pertaining to *Japaneseness* are more frequent as well. While localization in the German document group is mainly criticized in the context of a lack of German language texts or voiceovers, *Japaneseness* appears to be frequently connotated positively in both document groups. The code *Japanese vs. Western Audiences and Players* is more frequently connected with positive or negative sentiments in the Japanese document set, in the German document set only three segments coded this way intersected with either the *Positive* or *Negative* marker.

Overall, in the Japanese document set, a higher frequency of text segments being coded *Negative* intersect with other codes in the category *Meta/Context* than in the German set, reflecting the generally higher number of negative codes. *Negative* codes in the Japanese set appear most frequently in concern with the sub-categories *Comparison* and *Meta*. In the German documents set, the number of *Positive* segments intersecting with codes in the category *Meta/Context* is comparatively higher. The most frequent intersections are evident in the sub-categories and codes *Comparison – Predecessor*, *Meta* and *Evaluation – Paratext*. The sub-category *Experience Description* appears to be more positively connotated in the Japanese document set. This is due to a high number of reports depicting positive experiences of immersion or reaching a flow state.

Figure 45 shows the intersections between sentiment markers and the codes within the category *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*. In both document sets, text segments were most frequently coded with the *Combat System* code. This is not surprising. The combat system is a core element of all games within the sample chosen for this study. Again, however, the frequency of *Negative* codes coinciding with this code is higher in the Japanese document set than in the German one, partially because of frequent complaints towards the depth of the combat system. Japanese players frequently complained about the combat system of various games being too simplistic. The sentiment in concern to the game worlds of the games are slightly more positive in the Japanese document set, mainly related to frequent mentions of the games' "dungeons", specific areas of the game world, designed to provide challenges to the player, but also because of the

positive reception of the Open World style of the game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

Code System	positive	negative	SUM	positive	negative	SUM
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics			0			0
Gameplay			0			0
Combat System			137			151
Balance/Difficulty			54			56
Minigames/Subsystems			47			48
Gameplay - Overall			32			25
Quests			39			9
Controls			17			27
Characters/Party/NPC			15			15
Enemies/Monsters			16			14
Levelling/Progression			18			7
Quality of Life			8			26
Accessability			14			15
Exploration			7			8
Camera			9			8
UI			3			8
Mounts/Vehicles			8			3
Currency Management/In-Game Economy			2			2
Puzzle Solving			2			3
Play Modes			4			0
Tutorial			0			2
Structure			0			0
Length/Volume			33			28
Retention/Replayability/Endgame			28			41
World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons			44			57
Openness/Linearity			36			33
Pacing/Repetition/Changes			33			27
Play vs. Talk			16			7
Σ SUM	393	229	622	350	270	620

Figure 45 Code matrix of the frequency of codes in the category Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics intersecting with Positive or Negative coded segments per document set, size of circles is calculated per document set

Another difference evident here concerns the difference in the frequency of *Quests* codes. While 39 text segments in the German reviews coincide with the sentiment markers, this is only true for nine in the Japanese set. Quest refers to missions, the player is asked to carry out

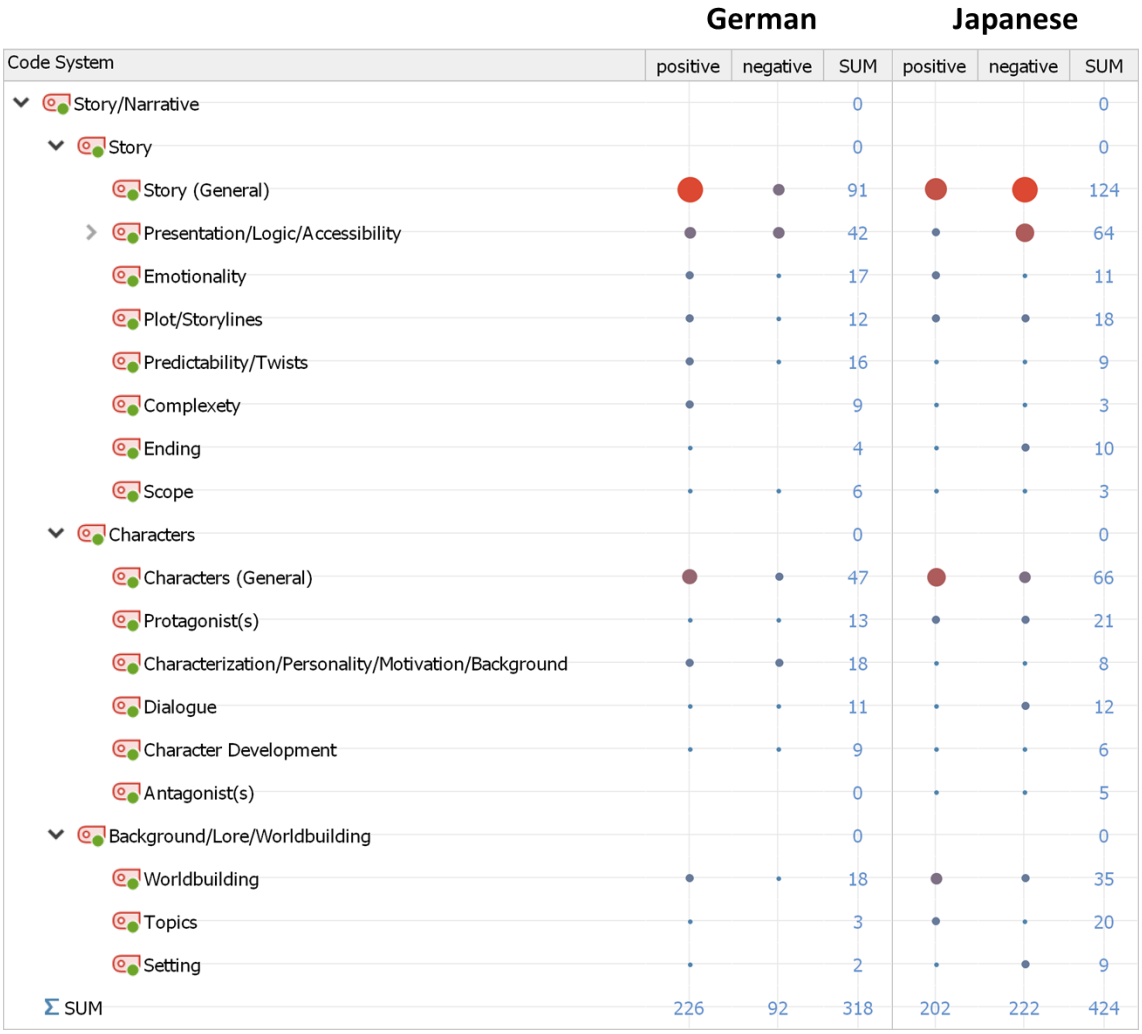
in-game, to receive in-game rewards. In concern to the selected games within the dataset, German players generally allocated more space in the reviews to the discussion of quests than the Japanese players. A perceived repetitive quest design with non-significant rewards is one of the most frequent criticism German players levied at the Game Final Fantasy XV with eight *Negative* and *Quest* codes coinciding within that document group. One German reviewers mentions for example the "soulless hunting quest or the 'get an item from A to B'-quests" (D_Rev_48) as one of his main complaints of the game, while another German reviewer elaborates on this in the following way:

> **D_Rev_085:** *Und ewig langweilige „bitte Hilfe, xy ist verschwunden, suche ihn und du kriegst Belohnung" sidequests motivieren mich in keinster Weise, sondern erscheinen als nervige Pausenfüller und Spielzeitverlängerer.*
>
> And endless boring "please help, xy has disappeared, find him and you will get a rewards" side quests do not motivate me at all, instead they are annoying fillers and extensions of game time.

On the other hand, the only mention of Final Fantasy XV's quest system in the Japanese document-set translates to "the quests were fun" (J_Rev_021). Negative evaluations of quests in the Japanese reviews were frequently observed solely in the reviews on ToCS and Shining Resonance Refrain.

The most salient difference between the German and Japanese document set becomes evident through an examination of the text segments in which the sentiment markers intersect with the codes from the category *Story/Narrative*, especially the codes *Story (General)* and *Presentation/Logic/Accessibility* (see Figure 46). Both codes indicate text segments that concern the reviewed game's narrative elements and significantly more often intersect with the *Negative* code in the Japanese document set, than in the German one. For both, *Story (General)* and *Presentation/Logic/Accessibility*, intersections with the *Negative* code are more frequent than with the *Positive* code in the Japanese reviews. This is highly interesting in concern to the main question of this thesis, aimed at uncovering potential differences between the experience of Japanese and German players with Japanese games. All games selected for this study are produced in Japan, within the same cultural context in which Japanese players are situated. This in turn potentially provides barriers for foreign users to enjoy the content of these games. Shell elements, such as audio-visual style and story elements, especially its accessibility or

logic, appear particularly prone to the potential of cultural barriers, which should lead to a more negative evaluation of these elements by German players. The results of the analysis of user reviews do however suggest the opposite, German players evaluate the games' stories more positive than the Japanese reviewers. This is more closely explored in Section 4.1.3 but can at least partially be attributed towards the strong representation of meso-level player cultures surrounding these games in Germany.



Code System	positive	negative	SUM	positive	negative	SUM
Story/Narrative			0			0
Story			0			0
Story (General)			91			124
Presentation/Logic/Accessibility			42			64
Emotionality			17			11
Plot/Storylines			12			18
Predictability/Twists			16			9
Complexety			9			3
Ending			4			10
Scope			6			3
Characters			0			0
Characters (General)			47			66
Protagonist(s)			13			21
Characterization/Personality/Motivation/Background			18			8
Dialogue			11			12
Character Development			9			6
Antagonist(s)			0			5
Background/Lore/Worldbuilding			0			0
Worldbuilding			18			35
Topics			3			20
Setting			2			9
Σ SUM	226	92	318	202	222	424

Figure 46 Code matrix of the frequency of codes in the category Story/Narrative intersecting with Positive or Negative coded segments per document set, size of circles is calculated per document set

Aside from the shell element of *Story/Narrative*, there are also differences apparent between German and Japanese reviewers regarding the intersection of sentiment markers with the category *Audio/Visual* (see Figure 47). These are however less pronounced. The intersections with the *Positive* sentiment marker in the Japanese document set are more strongly distributed between different codes than in the German set. While German reviewers praised the visual elements of a game mostly on a very general level (i.e. "the graphics are good"), Japanese

reviewers comparatively more often discuss the visual dimension of the characters within the game world. German reviewers on the other hand appear more likely to evaluate the visual aspects of the game world, than the Japanese reviewers. Criticism was slightly more frequent in Japanese reviews in concern to the user interface of the game Dragon's Dogma, which is the main reason for the higher frequency of segments coded with *UI* in the Japanese document set and relates to criticism on the realism of the game, examined more closely in Section 4.2.

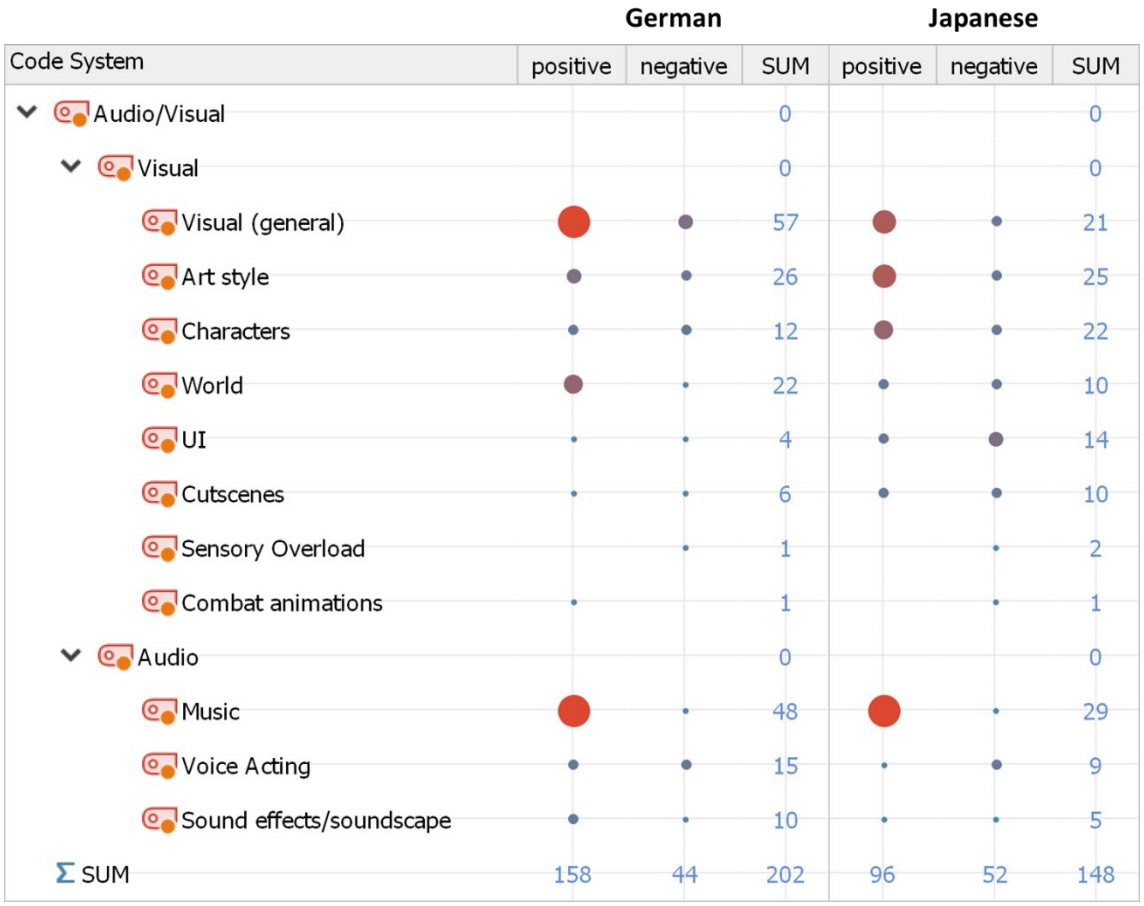


Figure 47 Code matrix of the frequency of codes in the category Audio/Visual intersecting with Positive or Negative coded segments per document set, size of circles is calculated per document set

Lastly, Figure 48 presents the intersection of sentiment markers with codes in the category *Technology*. A lower frequency of text segments coded with *Bugs* can at least partially be attributed towards the later release of most of the games in Germany, as bugs (i.e. technical glitches and problems) present in the Japanese version have arguably been fixed in the release version for the German market. German reviewers appear to more frequently mention the underlying technology of a game on a general level, this includes mentions of a game's engine, but also criticism towards a game being "technologically outdated".

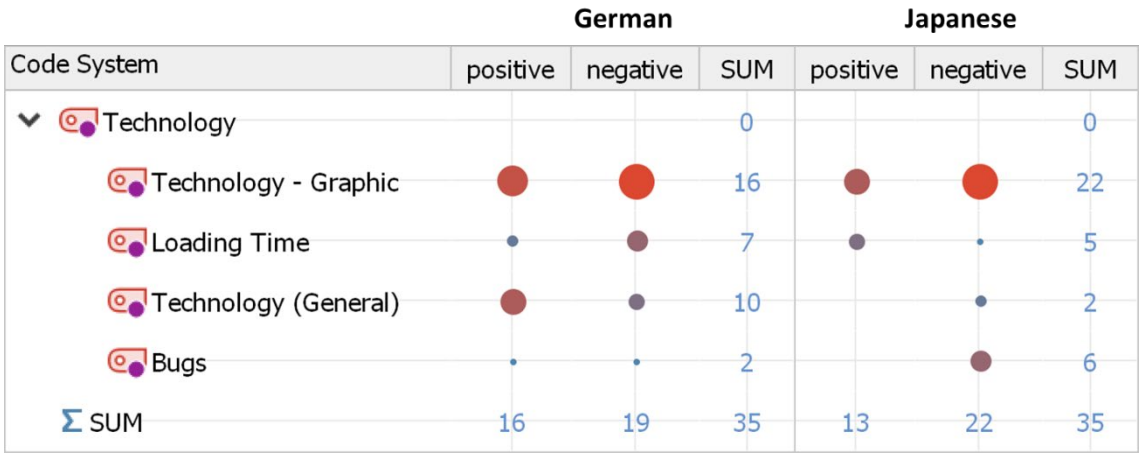


Figure 48 Code matrix of the frequency of codes in the category Technology intersecting with Positive or Negative coded segments per document set, size of circles is calculated per document set

To summarize, a comparison of how the sentiment markers *Positive* and *Negative* intersect with the codes in the thematic categories indicates differences in the experience and evaluation of the selected games between the German and Japanese players. These differences are not constant between all the selected games, but the tendency runs towards Japanese reviewers being more critical of and writing more negatively on them. This trend appears most salient within the category *Story/Narrative*, with Japanese reviewers being significantly more critical than German reviewers of the story elements than German players.

4.1.3 Close Readings

The results described above indicate differences in the way German and Japanese players evaluate specific parts of a game, especially its story. In this section, examples taken from the German and Japanese user reviews are shown and subjected to close readings to provide deeper insights into these differences within their contexts. Such close readings are necessary to grasp and compare the argumentative structure of user reviews and to uncover categorical differences and hidden meaning that is not visible in the results outlined above (Brummett 2018).

In some cases, differences are tremendous. Table 13 shows selected descriptions of the sub-categories *Story*, *Characters*, *Combat System* and *Comparison – Predecessor* for the games ToCS1 and 2. The German and Japanese descriptions found within the corpus are complete opposites (Brückner et al. 2019). While the German reviewers praise the games for their interesting and intriguing story of grand scope, Japanese reviewers criticize it as repetitive, stereotypical and naively presented. While German reviewers praise the games' characters as well developed, they are criticized in Japan as lacking depth and being unnecessary to the overall story. Although Japanese players see the games' combat system as one of the better

points, they still criticize it regarding balancing and tempo issues. German players on the other hand see it as dynamic and praise its great tactical depth. Lastly, in comparison to prior entries into the Legend of Heroes franchise, German players praise the advances in technology, design and combat, while the Japanese reviewers perceive them to be inferior in terms of story and characters.

Table 13 Differences in selected sub-categories between the German and Japanese document sets for ToCS.

Sub-Category	Germany	Japan
Story	Interesting, intriguing, grand scope	Repetitive, stereotypical, naively presented
Characters	Well developed	Lacking depth, unnecessary to the story
Combat System	Great tactical depth, dynamic	One of the game' better points, issues with balancing and tempo
Comparison – Predecessor	Advances in technology, design and combat	Inferior story and characters

The excerpts below show the original wording within the respective context in the review. In J_Rev_192, for example, the game is described as "boring", without any positive elements aside from the soundtrack:

> **J_Rev_192:** 今回の作品でここがよかったなーとおもうところは個人的にはありませんでした。あ、音楽くらいですねあとは 何も。それくらいつまらなかったです。
>
> Personally, there is nothing that I can say I found good about the game this time. Ah, the music, just that. It really was that boring.

In J_Rev_179 and J_Rev_184 the story of the game is subjected to strong criticism, because of its perceived inconsistency and simplicity. In J_Rev_184 it is unfavorably compared to a "light novel" a genre of Japanese popular literature tightly integrated into the anime and manga industries.

> **J_Rev_179:** まずストーリーがむちゃくちゃです。あっちこっち飛びすぎ。実質のラスボスも、「俺がラスボスだ！だから戦 え！」とばかりに出てきます。命をとして戦わなければならない理由もよくわかりませんでした。

For starters, the story is all over the place. It jumps too much. The last bosses also just come out saying “I’m the last boss, fight!”. I didn’t understand the reason why I had to fight for my life.

J_Rev_184: ラノベ以下の糞ストーリー 。モーションもロボットみたいな気持ち悪い動きで爽快感も無し 。ひたすら同じ言葉を繰り返す語彙力のないストーリー 。

The horrible story is worse than in a light novel. The animations are also robot like and feel bad, without any feeling of freshness. A badly written story where the same phrases are just repeated over and over.

On the other hand, German reviews depict an opposite view, strongly praising various game elements and particularly the story and characters as “exciting” and “well developed”.

D_Rev_220: *Die Charaktere werden innerhalb der Story unheimlich gut entwickelt. Jeder hat eine richtige Persönlichkeit, Motivationen, alles ist nachvollziehbar. Großes Kino.*

The characters are extremely well developed over the course of the story. Everyone has their own personality, motivations and everything makes sense. Great entertainment.

D_Rev_211: *Die Handlung ist sehr spannend und interessant gestaltet.*

The plot is very exciting and interestingly designed.

The game is praised by reviewers as “one of the best JRPGs in the last years” with almost no criticism being evident in the German reviews.

D_Rev_218: *Nach über 70 Stunden Spielzeit werde ich euch nun meine Erfahrungen mitteilen. Euch erklären warum "Trails of Cold Steel" eines der besten JRPG's der letzten Jahre ist und warum ihr mal einen Blick riskieren solltet. […] Von den insgesamt 11 Hauptcharakteren und diversen Nebencharakteren, ist mir jeder einzelne ans Herz gewachsen. […] Die Kämpfe, die Musik, Charaktere, Dialoge und die Geschichte fügen sich in meinen Augen zu einem grandiosen Spiel zusammen.*

After playing for 70 hours, I want to share my experiences, explain to you why "Trails of Cold Steel" is one of the best JRPGs in the last years and why you should take a look. […] Out of the 11 main characters and various supporting characters, I became fond of everyone. […] The fights, music, characters, dialogue and story come, in my eyes, together into a magnificent game.

Another example of strong differences is the game Kingdom Hearts III. Again, German reviews are generally positive. Criticism on the game is mostly focused on its localization, that is the lack of a German language dub. The following example showcases this:

D_Rev_074: *Es gibt einen Punkt wo ich ziemlich drüber enttäuscht war was auch schon länger bekannt ist und zwar das Kingdom Hearts 3 leider keine deutsche Synchronisation besitzt. Besonders dann wenn man die ersten beiden Teile auf der PS2 damals gespielt hat und man weiß was für eine erstklassige (!!!) deutsche Synchronisation diese besitzen.*

There is one point, about which I was really disappointed, although it was already known for quite some time, and that is that Kingdom Hearts 3 has sadly no German dub. Especially if one has played the first two games on the PS2, back in the day, and knows, what a first class (!!!) dub they got.

Japanese reviews on the other hand criticize a broader range of elements of the game. Foremost is however the presentation of the story as the following example shows:

J_Rev_043: *悪かった点。ストーリー。これにつきます。後半以降の酷さが特に目に付きますがディズニーの部分もなかなか酷いです。特にパイレーツオブカリビアンはジャックスパロウ、デイヴィジョーンズ以外の名前を知らないと確実に置いてかれます。それ以外のディズニーワールドもかなり端折られていてストーリーがよくわからない事が多いです。*

Bad points: Story. This is where it goes. It was especially horrible after the first half of the game, but the Disney worlds are also pretty bad. Especially Pirates of the Caribbean. You definitely get left behind if you don't know the name of characters

aside from Jack Sparrow and Davy Jones. Other Disney worlds are also quite broken and the story is often unclear.

The difficulty of following the game's story is shared by players who had played the previous games in the Kingdom Hearts franchise and thought themselves well versed in its wider narrative. This is evident in the next two examples.

J_Rev_042: *[前作]は結構遊んで視聴もしてある程度キャラクターの設定、関係性、ストーリーを把握しているつもりだったのですが、それでも理解に苦しんだ今作。良いところよりも悪いところが目立ち過ぎた。*

I played [the previous games] quite a lot and watched them as well. I thought I knew the characters their relationships and story. But I still struggled with understanding this game. More than the good points, the bad points stood out.

J_Rev_045: *過去作もやりましたが、メインのキーブレードの話はめちゃくちゃです。こんなの理解できる人いるのかな？って感じで。*

I've also played the previous games, but the main story on the key blades is all over the place. I get a feeling like, is there anyone who can understand this?

Again, this fits with the observation that Japanese players more strongly evaluate a game based on its story and narrative elements. In contrast, German players mention the story of Kingdom Hearts III less frequently. One reviewer argues that "many open questions are answered (D_Rev_067), while another professes to enjoy the "complicated story" (D_Rev_069). In general, mentions of the game's story tend to be shorter in the German reviews. The longest is the following segment of a review, touching upon the inconclusive ending of the game:

D_Rev_069: *Ich bin gespannt wie es weitergeht, weil sie das geschafft haben, was sie schon Jahrelang konnten: mega viel "Häh?" am Ende der Credits hinterlassen ;) Ich bin einerseits froh darüber (weil es weitergeht) anderseits hat es mich auch irgendwie getroffen.*

Im excited to see how it will go on, because they succeeded in doing what they have done for years: leaving a lot of "Huh?" at the end of the credits ;) On the one hand I'm happy (because it continues) on the other hand I'm also somewhat touched.

While the differences between German and Japanese reviews in concern to the story of Kingdom Hearts III are clear, this is less true in for the category *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*. The combat system is for example received rather positively by German and Japanese players alike, describing it as "fun". One German reviewer does however remark that they think that combat has become too confusing, because of the many animations involved.

The differences in the reception of the story are however not constant across all games. The game Shining Resonance Refrain was included in the analysis for its peculiarities in story and character design, especially its blatant oversexualization of female characters. This was expected to be perceived in different ways by German and Japanese players. Such differences are however less pronounced than expected. German players praise the "interesting story" (D_Rev_190), calling it "epic and extensive" (D_Rev_189), while Japanese reviewers are less enthusiastic but also not openly critical. One Japanese reviewer mentions for example that the story was his reason for buying the game, while another mentions that he cleared the game, because the story was not uninteresting.

In concern to the game's characters, German and Japanese players are rather positive. German players positively describe the characters' visual design as "beautiful" or "diverse".

D_Rev_1919: *Was mir vor allem an diesem Spiel gefällt sind die Charaktere, die Charakterdesigns sind wirklich wunderschön und abwechslungsreich.* What I find especially good about this game are the characters, the character designs are truly beautiful and diverse.
D_Rev_184: *Mir gefiel das Spiel sehr auch die Charaktere.* I liked the game very much, the characters as well.

Japanese reviewers argue similarly:

J_Rev_152: *キャラクターも個性的* The characters are also unique.

But they go into greater detail on the characters, with several Japanese reviews hinting at a deeper relation to the characters than is evident in the German reviews.

J_Rev_149: キャラに魅力を感じ、買ってみました。 […] 個人的には、買って良かったかな、ちなみに最初は、キリカに魅力を感じ買いましたが、リンナが登場したら、虜になりました w I felt the appeal of the characters and bought the game because of it. […] Personally, I'm glad that I bought the game. By the way, at first I was mesmerized by Kilika and bought the game, but as soon as Rinka showed up I was captivated by her lol
J_Rev_146: 最後に、リンナはキャラ的にも、顔も、めっちゃ可愛いし。 Finally, Rina's character and her face are extremely cute.

For example, no German reviewer explicitly mentions the face of an in-game character. None of the game's various female characters that the playable main character can interact with are discussed by name in the German reviews, while Japanese reviewers frequently mention how they were affected by the characters and who their preferred character is. This level of attachment to in-game characters is absent among German reviewers.

Another interesting case for examining potential differences in the reception of a game's characters is provided by the protagonists of the game Final Fantasy XV. In German and English language media, the protagonists of the Final Fantasy XV have often been likened to a Japanese boy band, for their visual design. Several German reviewers mention this, as the following examples show.

D_Rev_043: *Man streift mit einer stereotypischen „Boy-Band" durch die Areale. Es gibt den Inteligenten [sic!], den Starken und den Spaßvogel - nicht sehr differenziert ausgearbeitet. Das kenne ich besser von Final Fantasy! Auch die Dialoge sind teilweise sehr abgedroschen, schade!* One traverses the areas with a stereotypical "boy band". There is the intelligent one, the strong one, and the mood maker – but not very deeply characterized. That's been done better in Final Fantasy! The dialogue as well is partially corny. Too bad!
D_Rev_047: *Ebenso muss man sich an den Japano Charakteren erfreuen können, denn Noctis und Gefolge sind nun ja wirklich eine japanische Boygroup.*

> One has to be able to enjoy the Japano [sic!] characters, because Noctis and his people are truly a Japanese boy group.

In the Japanese reviews, the protagonists are frequently likened to hosts, from a Japanese host club. Host clubs are establishments were male staff entertains female clients through lighthearted conversation. One Japanese reviewer examines this critically by linking it to the East-West dichotomy between Japanese and Western games and arguing that he prefers that over a "westernized" character design.

> **J_Rev_026:** *見た目なんだけどホスト 4 人がーって言うが、あの海外ゲーとかの渋いおっさんやら気持ち悪い見た目の亜人種やらモブっぽい男とかあ言うのがいいの？そう言うのと比べたらまだホストでいいやって思うよ。*
>
> As to their looks, many go on about there being four hosts. But what about these surly older guys in Western games or badly portrayed Asian people or mob-like guys? Is that better? Compared to that, I think hosts are still okay.

Another Japanese reviewer argues that the games art style, including the characters, are the result of an attempt to appeal to Western markets.

> **J_Rev_029:** *欧米向ですよね。バタ臭いっていうのかな。*
>
> Directed at the West, right? Stinks like butter, is that what you call it?

Characters and the overall story are also frequently mentioned in the reviews on the game Ni no Kuni II. Here, the descriptions between German and Japanese reviewers are however highly similar. The following examples show a similar evaluation of the game's characters and story across German and Japanese reviews, with characters being described as shallow and the story as weak or stereotypical.

> **D_Rev_093:** *Ein RPG lebt in erster Linie von interessanten Charakteren und einer spannenden Story. Ni Nu Kuni 2 hat leider nichts davon.*
>
> An RPG depends foremost on interesting characters and an exciting story. Sadly, Ni Nu Kuni 2 [sic!] misses both.

J_Rev_058: *キャラクターが感じるであろ（感じるべき）戸惑いや葛藤といった感情の動きや仕草が上手く描かれていないような気がします* I feel that the emotions, that the characters (should) feel, like hesitation or conflict are not portrayed well.
D_Rev_093: *Die Charaktere in dem Spiel sind völlig ohne tiefe. Es kommt zu keinem der Charaktere eine Sympathie auf, die einen motiviert weiter zu spielen. Auch Evan, der Hauptcharakter der mal der König der Welt werden soll, ist total uninteressant.* The characters in the game are completely without depth. There doesn't emerge any sympathy for any of the characters, that would motivate one to continue playing. Evan as well, the main characters who is supposed to become king of the world one day is completely uninteresting.
D_Rev_096: *Das schlimmste ist leider die Story. Diese schwankt zwischen ausreichend bis durchschnittlich.* Sadly, the worst is the story. It fluctuates between sufficient and average.
J_Rev_060: ストーリーがあまりに陳腐 The story is just too cliché.

Aside from differences in concern to story and characters, one main difference between Japanese and German players is their opinions of each other and each other's games. German and Japanese players alike, frequently discuss the "Japaneseness" of some of the games they review and what differences there are between Japanese and Western games and players. While this was to be expected for German players reviewing Japanese games, the frequency of Japanese reviewers touching upon this topic was unanticipated. The "Japaneseness" of games is discussed in different forms but usually touches upon at least one of the following points:

- The game as a game that was developed by a Japanese company or belongs to a "uniquely" Japanese genre (JRPG)
- Japanese contents, including story, characters and overall tone (e.g. humor)
- Japanese mechanics, usually referring to a turn-based combat system
- Japanese setting, referring to the game actually taking place in (a fictionalized version of) Japan

- Japanese art style, such as a visual design inspired by manga or anime

For German players, the perceived Japaneseness of the games is often linked to their perception as being unique and fundamentally different from the "normal" games Western users play. For example, one German reviewer of the game Yakuza 0 recommends the game with the following words:

> **D_Rev_235:** *Ich kann Yakuza 0 jedem empfehlen der auf der Suche nach Spielen ist, die sich nicht an westliche Standards angleichen, sondern etwas eigenes, in diesem Falle japanisches, mitbringen.*
>
> I can recommend Yakuza 0 to anyone who is searching for games, that do not adhere to Western standards, but bring with them something unique, in this case Japanese.

Other German reviewers of the game Nier: Automata (Platinum Games 2017) similarly frame the game as unique, linking this to its Japanese provenance:

> **D_Rev_087:** *Klar das Szenario ist total abgedreht, der Stil absolut japanisch. Ich meine Goth-Androiden die mit Schwertern Blechdosen zerhäckseln, ist schon erstmal gewöhnungsbedürftig.*
>
> Of course, the scenario is completely over the top, the style absolutely Japanese. I mean, Goth androids that destroy tin cans with swords needs some getting used to at first.
>
> **D_Rev_077:** *Diese Fantasiewelt in die man von der ersten Minute gezogen wird mit seinen außergewöhnlichen Ideen auf die nur unsere Freunde aus Japan kommen können.*
>
> This fantasy world in which one gets sucked from the first minute with its unique ideas is something, that only our friends from Japan could think of.

This sense of weirdness is for many German players a defining trait of Japanese games. Reviewers of Yakuza 0 mention that "not everything makes sense" and that the "truly bizarre" and "crazy" parts of the game showcase its Japanese origin. This weirdness is here framed in a positive way.

D_Rev_235: *Es wird nicht darauf geachtet das alles Sinn machen muss und damit meine ich nicht einmal die Story, sondern das sehr gute und spaßige Gameplay, bei dem es auch Finisher Moves gibt wie "streue deinem Gegner Salz in die Augen" und ich wiederhole, das ist ein Finisher!*

Not everything is meant to make sense, and I don't even mean the story, but the very good and fun gameplay, with finisher moves such as "scatter salt into the eyes of your opponent" and I repeat, that's a finisher!

D_Rev_231: *Noch dazu ist das Spiel in vielerlei Hinsicht sehr japanisch, für den normalen Mitteleuropäer muten etliche Inhalte wahrscheinlich ziemlich skurril an.*

Additionally, the game is in many aspects very Japanese, for the normal central European, some of the contents are truly bizarre.

D_Rev_232: *[Es wimmelt von] völlig verrückten und skurrilen Nebenaufgaben, die vor japanischem Humor und der einzigartigen fernöstlichen Popkultur geradezu überschäumen.*

[There are] many completely crazy and bizarre sub-quests, overflowing with Japanese humor and the unique far Eastern pop culture.

Somewhat ironically, this image for uniqueness in Japanese games however also leads to these unique elements being regarded as typical or stereotypical by German players. For example, one German reviewer on the game Persona 5 describes the game thus:

D_Rev_164: *Typisch für ein J-RPG ist die Geschichte abgedreht, von moderner Hi-Tech durchzogen und von Teenagern überflutet.*

Typical for a J-RPG, the story is over the top, filled with modern hi-tech and flooded with teenagers.

Another reviewer sees the story of ToCS as "typical for the Japano genre" (D_Rev_219). This notion of elements being typical for Japanese games does extend beyond the story elements. A reviewer of the game Octopath Traveler recounts his expectations of JRPGs as that extend towards the overall game design, their pacing, the amount of dialogue and their difficulty.

D_Rev_101: *Ich hatte bisher immer ein sehr grundsätzliches Problem mit jrpgs. Die waren mir oft: -zu ausgeflippt - zu träge - zu gesprächslastig - mit Tutorials vollgestopft - im Kampf zu anspruchslos*

Until now I always had very fundamental problems with JRPGs. For me, they were often – too over the top – too slow – too focused on talking – too full with tutorials – too easy during combat

Another reviewer of the game Tales of Berseria contrasts their expectations of JRPGs, which they prefer to be turn-based, with Western RPGs where they prefer a real-time combat system. At the same time, they criticize the "colorful candy fights" and button mashing they argue are common in JRPGs.

D_Rev_193: *Ich habe sowieso die eigenartige Einstellung, dass JRPG's immer rundenbasiert sein müssen. Bei westlichen RPG's wie The Witcher, oder Dragon Age, passen Echtzeitkämpfe besser. Aber bei JRPG's wie Final Fantasy, oder Tales Of Berseria finde ich diese bunten Knall - Bonbon Kämpfe mit Buttonsmashing furchtbar.*

In any case I have the strange opinion that JRPGs need to be turn-based. For Western RPGs, like The Witcher or Dragon Age, real-time combat is a better fit. But for JRPGs like Final Fantasy or Tales of Berseria, I think these colorful candy fights with button mashing are horrible.

Aside from story and mechanics, some Japanese games provide Western players with experiences akin to virtual tourism. With a feeling of having crossed over and being immersed in a foreign culture. Reviewers of Persona 5 mention the great atmosphere provided by the Tokyo setting and the attention paid to the locations within the game. Similarly, reviewers of the games Yakuza 0 and Judgement mention that they truly feel like being in Japan. One reviewer of Yakuza 0 elaborates on this when he describes the authenticity of the game world.

D_Rev_232: *Das gesamte Setting wirkt dabei so glaubwürdig und ist mit so viel Liebe zum Detail umgesetzt, dass man dieses Spiel glatt als Ersatz für einen Japan-Urlaub ansehen könnte.*

> The whole setting seems so believable, with so much attention being paid to details, that it can be almost a substitute for a vacation in Japan.

Other reviewers mention that they chose the Japanese dub for the games, even though they do not understand it, because it seems "more authentic" (D_Rev_066). Some German reviewers also relate feelings of nostalgia with some games in the sample, such as Octopath Traveler (D_Rev_101), or ToCS, which is are described as an "old-school JRPG" (D_Rev_102) or as a "great old-school RPG" (D_Rev_206) respectively.

German and Japanese players alike do however also appear to associate negative images with Japanese games, regarding their competitiveness with Western games. This is particularly evident in concern to the technological sophistication of games, their scale and their creativity. To a certain extent, this is contrary to the results of Zagal and Tomuro (2013), who find that Japanese players generally associate Japanese games with higher quality, and can potentially be attributed towards broader changes in the games market and industry, in particular the switch towards the eight generation of game consoles, such as the PS4. As one Japanese reviewer mentions:

> **J_Rev_010:** *PS3 時代から日本メーカーの低迷が続き、ソフトのクオリティも世界より劣っていた日本のメーカー*
>
> The downturn of Japanese developers since the age of the PS3 continues, the quality of [game] software also fell behind the rest of the world.

The problems of Japanese developers and game production are touched upon in several Japanese reviews, for example by mentioning that Japanese developers appear to have difficulties in maintaining quality and managing large scale projects. Or, as the next example showcases, in fully utilizing the hardware of gaming platforms:

> **J_Rev_152:** PS4 には高解像度のグラフィック技術があって、それを生かすための洋ゲーであったりは充実していますがこういった RPG はあまり多いとは言えません
>
> I enjoy playing Western games that fully utilize the high-resolution technology of the PS4, but RPGs like this are not that common.

However, at the same time Western games are also criticized for their long loading times, as apparent in the following example taken from a review on the game Tales of Berseria:

> **J_Rev_162:** *ゲームとして見てもロードを全く感じさせないほどスムーズなので、洋ゲーにありがちなロードのストレスがないです。*
>
> By looking at it as a game as well, the loading is so smooth that you don't feel it at all. You don't have the stress with loading, common in Western games.

Another difference becomes visible when looking at the evaluation of the visual presentation of the games in the sample, that employ a more realistic graphic style, as contrasted with the often-employed abstract anime style of games like Persona 5. Japanese reviewers frequently mention these "real" looking graphic styles, which is completely absent in the German reviews. For instance, one reviewer describes the game Dragon's Dogma as a "realistic Dragon Quest" (J_Rev_001), while another describes the characters of Devil May Cry 5 (Capcom 2019) as "too real looking" (J_Rev_008). The review presented above, describing Final Fantasy XV as being too "westernized" arguably goes into a similar direction. Interestingly, such criticism or mentions of the graphic style being "too realistic" do not appear in concern to the game Resident Evil 7, the game with the most realistic graphic style in the sample. This is perhaps because of an inherent genre difference of the game, and different meso-level player cultures that surround it.

Contrary to such descriptions of Japanese reviewers of some of the game's graphic styles being too realistic, German players frequently mention the "anime", "manga" or "cartoon look" and the "colorful design" of some games in the sample. One reviewer describes Kingdom Hearts III in the following way:

> **D_Rev_075:** *Immerhin ist das Spiel schön bunt und an jeder Ecke strahlen einem die verschiedensten Farben entgegen.*
>
> At least, the game is very colorful, and one is greeted by the most diverse colors on any corner.

Similarly, a reviewer of the game Persona 5 mentions being at first "overwhelmed" by its dynamic and colorful visual presentation.

D_Rev_158: *Ich war am Anfang etwas überfordert, da es es immer irgendetwas auf dem Bildschirm gibt was sich bewegt. Das kann am Anfang fordernd sein, aber passt einfach zum Konzept des Spiels und zum flair des den das ganze versprüht.*

I was somewhat overwhelmed in the beginning, as there is always something moving on the screen. That can be somewhat taxing in the beginning, but it fits the concept and flair of the game.

The colorful or anime like graphic styles are met with somewhat mixed reactions by the players, ranging from descriptions of this being "too colorful" and "cheesy" (D_Rev_088) to it being "like a cartoon" and "childish" (D_Rev_139). Positive reactions can however also be found, especially in concern to the games Ni No Kuni II and Persona 5. Below are two excerpts from German reviews describing the art style of Ni no Kuni II.

D_Rev_093: *Nunja, das ist Geschmackssache. Die Grafik ist gezeichnet, finde ich aber persönlich garnicht übel.*

Well, this is a matter of taste. Personally, I don't dislike that the graphics are drawn.

D_Rev_097: *Durch die Komponenten aus Animestil und von Hisaishi einfließender Musik fühlt sich der Spieler in einen vom Studio Ghibli inspirierten Film hineinversetzt, an dem er direkt durch sein Einwirken teilhaben kann.*

Because of the components of an anime [art] style and the music by Hisaishi, the player feels like he is placed into a movie inspired by Studio Ghibli, in which he can directly partake through his actions.

Negative comments in concern to the games' visual elements in the German reviews are often focused on them being perceived to be outdated and not up to the standards of other contemporary games. Several reviewers lament the "exceedingly simple graphics on PS3 level" (D_Rev_230) of the game Yakuza 0 or argue that Dragon's Dogma "can't keep up with the big games" (D_Rev_006). While such direct criticism, as the example above has shown, can also be found in some Japanese reviews, expectations appear to differ. One Japanese reviewer of the game Devil May Cry 5 hints at that when he surmises the games visual elements as:

J_Rev_008: *最近の洋ゲーに慣れてしまったので驚きはなかったです。*

I have grown used to recent Western games, so there was no surprise.

German players seem to expect a technologically, that is in concern to framerates, textures and resolutions, up-to-date game, while this seems to be less important to the Japanese players. Another example showing this is German player's astonishment that the visual presentation of characters in the games Ni no Kuni II and Draqon Quest XI does not change, based on the equipment the characters wears. The following review (D_Rev_093) is from a German reviewer on the game Ni no Kuni II, while the one below it (D_Rev_030) is from a German reviewer on the game Dragon Quest XI.

D_Rev_093: *Was ich mir gewünscht hätte wäre, dass das Aussehen der Ausrüstung anpasst. Heut zu Tage sollte sowas Standart sein.* What I would have wished for, is that the look matches the equipment. That should be standard today.
D_Rev_030: *Und warum nur bestimmte Kleidungsstücke das Aussehen eines Charakters verändern ergibt für mich keinen Sinn, denn inzwischen sollte es Standard sein das man neue Rüstungen nach dem Anlegen auch sehen kann!* And why only certain clothes change the look of a character makes no sense to me, because it should be standard by now, that one can see the armor after equipping it!

The differences between German and Japanese reviewers are more apparent in some games, than in others. The most extreme examples shown were ToCS and Kingdom Hearts III. Overall, differences in the concrete evaluation of the game contents are most salient in concern to the narrative or story elements of the games and especially evident in concern to the characters. Differences in how gameplay elements are experienced include the combat system, but also difficulty settings and questions of linearity and freedom within the game world that are explored in more detail in the presentation of the TAP results. The most fundamental difference between the German and Japanese players is however not imminent in the games, but emerges from their context. The perceived Japaneseness of a game greatly influences the expectations and experiences of German players playing (some) Japanese games. At the same time, different expectations in concern to the graphical style of a game are evident. While German players frequently (for good or bad) comment on the "anime" or "manga alike" look of some of the selected games, Japanese reviewers mention the "real" look of the games Dragon's Dogma,

Devil May Cry 5 and Final Fantasy XV. This hints at differences at the macro-level of game culture, where for German players, a realistic graphical representation within a game is seen as the norm, while for Japanese players, abstract and stylized visual representations are more common. These can provide barriers for players but can also be part of the games' appeal for specific meso-level players subcultures, for example as evident for the reviewers of ToCS and to a lesser degree Persona 5. Furthermore, differences are evident in the expectations towards overall (technological) quality of a game's graphics. While German players frequently use Western games, such as the Witcher III or Horizon: Zero Dawn, as standards for evaluating a game's graphics, Japanese players expectations appear overall not as high, with more frequent positive mentions of the games' overall graphical quality and comparisons that are often made to other domestic games, for example the Dragon Quest series.

4.1.4 Quantitative Analysis

The qualitative analyis of user reviews above, allows for an examination of what topics are discussed in which ways in both, the German and Japanese user reviews. The code frequencies presented in the beginning of this chapter show the frequency of codes within the sub-set of analyzed user reviews and arguably at least hint at the overall allocation of topics within the larger corpus. This is indicated by there not being a significant change in the relative frequency of codes between the German and Japanese document sets, even if coded segments are only counted once per document. In that sense, the code system and the distribution of codes appears robust. However, as the analyzed reviews were chosen based on grounded theory theoretical sampling, they are not statistically representative of the larger corpus of user reviews collected for this study. By examining word ferquencies in the overall corpus of reviews, and utlizizing a custom-buil dictionary for a quantitative examination, this section provides some insights into how topics uncovered in the qualtitative analysis are represented within the larger corpus.

Figure 49 depicts a word cloud generated in MAXQDA based on the overall word frequencies within the German document group. The author amended the default stop list in MAXQDA to exclude frequent terms without relevance to this study. A list with the 50 most frequent terms in the German document set is included in Appendix D-1. It is apparent, that the word "story" is the most frequent term in the document set. This highlights tow facts. First, the central role that the narrative of the selected games plays in their overall evaluation by players independent from their cultural background and second, the comparative clarity of the relation between the word story and the concept story, i.e. between signifier and signified. Altough other terms, such

as scenario or plot, are used as well, "story" is by far the most frequent and common term used when referring to the games' narrative elements. Altough the results shown in Section 4.1.1 suggest an overall higher frequeny of mentions in concern to the games' mechanics than their story, the category *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* is thematically and lexically broader. One example of a frequent term that is a signifier of a game's mechanics that is common in both document sets is the term "combat system" (German: "Kampfsystem"). The most frequent terms in the German documents set are related to the games' story (e.g. "Story", "Handlung", Geschichte), the game world ("Welt", "World"), characters ("Charaktere") and combat system ("Kampfsystem", "Gegner", "Waffen").

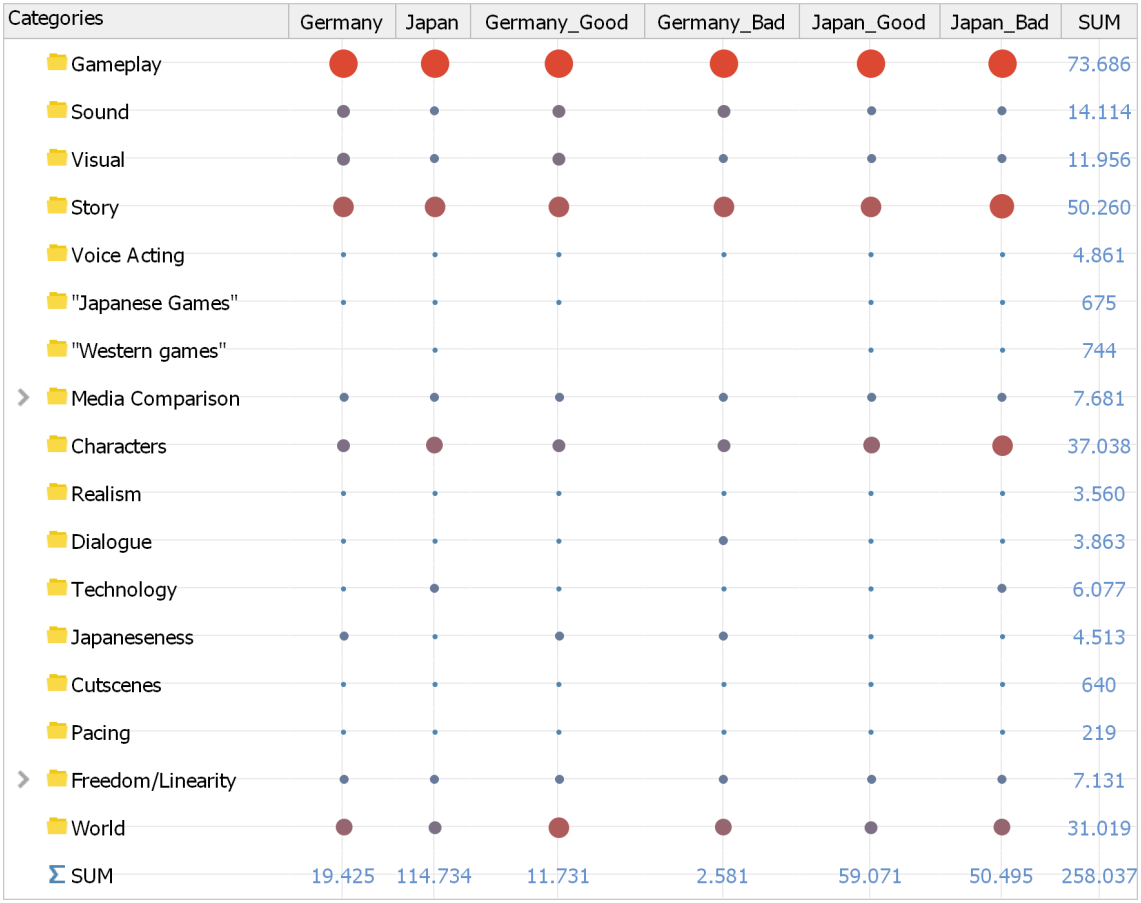
Figure 49 Word cloud of German document set

Because of the intricacies of the Japanese language, especially the absence of spaces to differentiate single words, calculating the word frequencies for the Japanese document set proves more difficult. Although MAXQDA provides a function for the analysis of Japanese documents, it does not reliably differentiate between words and has problems with tokenization. For example, the term "story" (*sutōrī*) is not consistently recognized. Instead, the nonexistent *sutō* is displayed. By calculating the frequency of specific terms within the Japanese document set, some insights can however be gleaned. A cursory examination does for example reveal, that the terms "story" (*sutōrī*) appears to be the most frequent term in the Japanese document set as well (15,576 hits) with the terms "combat" (*sentō*; 7,404 hits) and "character" (*kyarakutā*; 3,303 hits) also appearing with a high frequency.

The fragmentation of signifiers per signified, that is the high variety of words and terms that can be used to describe a certain aspect of a game, including synonyms, are also affected by linguistic differences. For example, it is comparatively common in Japanese to use English terms written in the Katakana alphabet conjointly with native Japanese terms to refer to elements of a game (e.g. *kyarakutā*, *battoru shisutemu*, etc.). To present an overview of how frequently certain aspects of a game are mentioned in the overall reviews, it is necessary to create a dictionary of terms related to specific concepts. To facilitate the quantitative analysis of the larger corpus of user reviews, the author created a dictionary encompassing 17 concepts with 198 German and Japanese terms (see Appendix D-2).

The dictionary developed for this analysis adapts selected categories from the qualitative analysis. The inclusion of the sub-categories from the category *Meta/Context*, is limited towards terms that either frame Japanese games or players or "Western" games or players. The dictionary also accounts for other forms of media, mentioned in the reviews. Other sub-categories from the *Meta/Context* category are difficult to include, as they generally emerge from the complex context of larger text segments. To a lesser degree, such difficulties also exist for the categories *Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics* and *Story/Narrative*. The ludic elements of a game are often expressed in non-concise and non-consistent language, that overlaps with other concepts. For example, it is hard to account for elements such as user's descriptions of linearity or freedom within a game. On the other hand, some terms are used in a broad variety of contexts (polysemy), making it unpractical to include them in the dictionary. Like in English, the word *Level* used in German can refer to both, a character's level as a measure of progress, or an area or instance of the game world. The Japanese word *hanashi* can refer to a Game's story but is also used in various different ways as it can also simply mean "talk". The Japanese word *sekaikan* ("worldview"), was found in the qualitative analysis to be often used in contexts to refer to, what is commonly called "world building" within a game. However, the term was also observed to be used to refer solely to a game's visual or story elements. The central term "design" in Japanese (*dezain*) predominantly is used to refer to the visual elements of a game. In German on the other hand, *Design* is also used to describe for example how the mechanics of the game are designed.

The dictionary[24] used for this analysis is therefore inherently non-complete. However, the author attempted to include as comprehensive a sample of words as possible, with the aim of maximizing the comparability between the German and Japanese document sets. As the main aim here lies in the comparison of the German and Japanese data, categories for which it was difficult to include a comparative amount of dictionary terms to signify a category in both document sets are not included in the analysis.



Categories	Germany	Japan	Germany_Good	Germany_Bad	Japan_Good	Japan_Bad	SUM
Gameplay							73.686
Sound							14.114
Visual							11.956
Story							50.260
Voice Acting							4.861
"Japanese Games"							675
"Western games"							744
Media Comparison							7.681
Characters							37.038
Realism							3.560
Dialogue							3.863
Technology							6.077
Japaneseness							4.513
Cutscenes							640
Pacing							219
Freedom/Linearity							7.131
World							31.019
Σ SUM	19.425	114.734	11.731	2.581	59.071	50.495	258.037

Figure 50 MAXQDA code matrix, resulting from the quantitative analysis of user reviews with the created dictionary

Figure 50 depicts the frequency of terms (see Appendix D-3), belonging to the selected categories in the dictionary for the German and Japanese document sets (first and second column from the left). Similarities to the results of the qualitative analysis are apparent. As in the qualitative analysis, gameplay is the category with the highest number of hits, followed by story. Different from the code system of the qualitative analysis, “Characters” is here used as

[24] The dictionary (see Appendix D-2) was created by the author, a native speaker of German with an advanced degree in Japanese language education. A Japanese native speaker was consulted during the process of creating the dictionary.

a category. This reflects the difficulty of quantitatively differentiating whether characters are discussed in terms of their narrative function or characteristics, or, for example, their visual design. The observation, that characters appear to be more frequently discussed in the Japanese user reviews are conclusive with the results from the qualitative analysis. In contrast, German players make more frequent mentions of the game world. Overall, the results of the qualitative analysis, outlined in the previous sections, appear to conform to the larger corpus of user reviews, indicating the robustness of results and an arguably significant degree of representativeness despite the method of theoretical sampling.

Next to the German and Japanese document set in Figure 50, two separate document sub-sets for each document set are displayed. The sub-sets Germany_Good and Japan_Good include all reviews in the respective document sets with an overall rating of four or five out of five. The sub-sets Germany_Bad and Japan_Bad include all reviews in the respective document sets with an overall score of three or less. Story and characters are mentioned comparatively more frequently in the bad than in the good Japanese reviews. On the other hand, good German reviews mention more frequently visual elements of a game than the bad German reviews, the higher frequency of mentions of the game world in positive reviews is correlated with this, as it is often discussed in visual terms. Aside from that, the label “Japanese game” is not used at all in the German reviews.

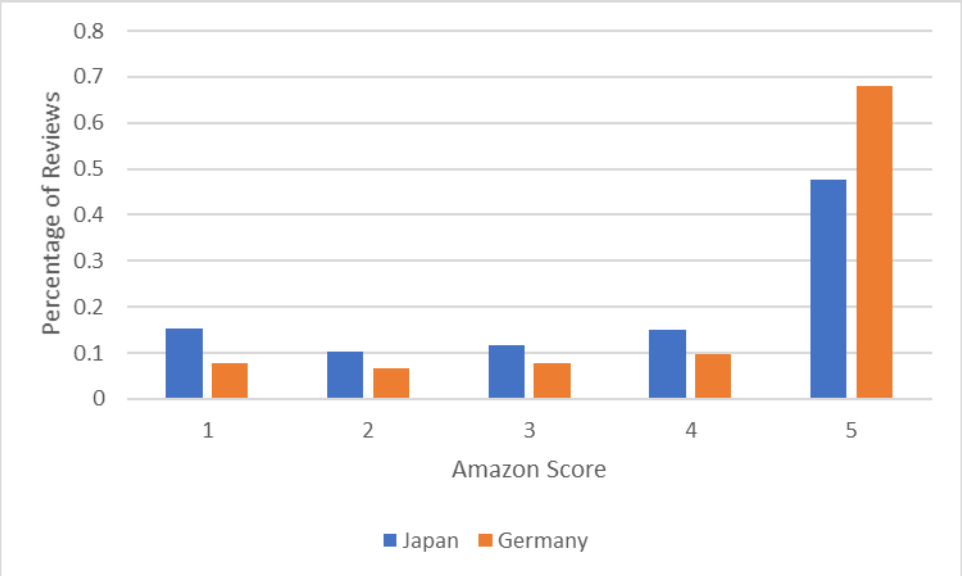


Figure 51 Percentage of reviews per document set and amazon score (Japan: n=17,867; Germany: n=3,437)

The overall difference between the negative and positive sentiments expressed in the reviews and discussed in the qualitative analysis is also evident on a quantitative level. In Figure 50, this is for example apparent in the number of hits for the negative Japanese document set.

Figure 51 depicts percentage of reviews for the German and Japanese documents sets per Amazon score given to the game, with one being lowest and five being the highest score. In general, for both document groups, positive reviews are far more common than negative reviews. At least partially this can be attributed towards the high quality of the selected games, as it is consistent with the Metacritic scores, used as one criterion for selecting the games. However, while close to 70 percent of German reviewers award the highest score to the reviewed games, the Japanese reviews are slightly more negative, with a comparatively higher amount of highly negative reviews, that is an Amazon score of one.

Despite the high similarity in the allocation of categories between the German and Japanese document set in Figure 50, a closer look shows however stark differences between the document groups, that is between the allocation of topics per game (see Appendix D-4 and D-5). Across most games, Japanese reviewers more frequnently mention the games' characters than German reviewers. On the other hand, German players more frequently mention the audio-visual elements of the games. For the games Dragon Quest XI, Resident Evil 7, and Tales of Berseria, the German players mention story elements more frequently than the Japanese players. For Dragon Quest XI, German players more frequently mention the game's sound, which appears as one of the most frequent categores in the German document set, next to Gameplay and Story, while Japanese players again mention the game's characters more frequently. Aside from such differences and a high frequency of hits for the category Japaneseness, the German and Japanese document groups follow however the same patterns, in the general allocation of hits per category. That is, aside from the above-mentioned exceptions, the most frequently coded categories are the same in the German and Japanse reviews on each game.

4.2 Think-Aloud Protocols

4.2.1 Overview and Quantitative Analysis

The corpus of transcribed think-aloud protocols encompasses 1,131,255 characters (German: 805,743; Japanese: 325,512). The TAPs vary greatly between participants in concern to the frequency of utterances made during the play session and their content. Participants were instructed to voice their thoughts and impressions as frequently as possible while still being able to concentrate on the game they play. The experienced ("hardcore") players among the participants, especially those with prior experiences playing JPRGs, appear to have had less

difficulty with voicing their thoughts during play. On the other hand, less experienced participants less frequently provided coherent utterances during stressful sequences, such as during combat.

Participants' utterances in the TAPs broadly fall into the following categories:

- *Mentions of the participants' prior game experiences and overall preferences*, e.g. what kind of game they normally play and whether they have played other games by the same developer
- *Purely descriptive statements on the game and the participants' actions within the game world*, e.g. "I will select the 'normal' difficulty setting", "I decided to prioritize this quest", or "I will go this way"
- *Participants' personal opinions, evaluations and sentiments regarding the games*, e.g. "I dislike the constant interruptions by cutscenes", "I would have preferred it, if the loading screen would have included tips on how to play the game", "The story doesn't make any sense" or simple statements such as "that's cute" or "that's scary".
- *Critical discussions of game elements, often referring to the perceived intent of the developers or by comparisons to other games and media*, e.g. "I wonder why they did not include a fast-travel option in the game. Maybe to heighten immersion?"
- *Parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl 1956) with the narrative elements within the game*, especially the characters, e.g. "What are you doing Evan?" or "come on, get over here!"
- *Meta-level comments on narrative elements, such as jokes or quips about the games' contents or descriptions of ludo-narrative dissonances*, e.g. "Why can the president of the United States fight with swords?", or practices, such as giving nicknames to certain characters

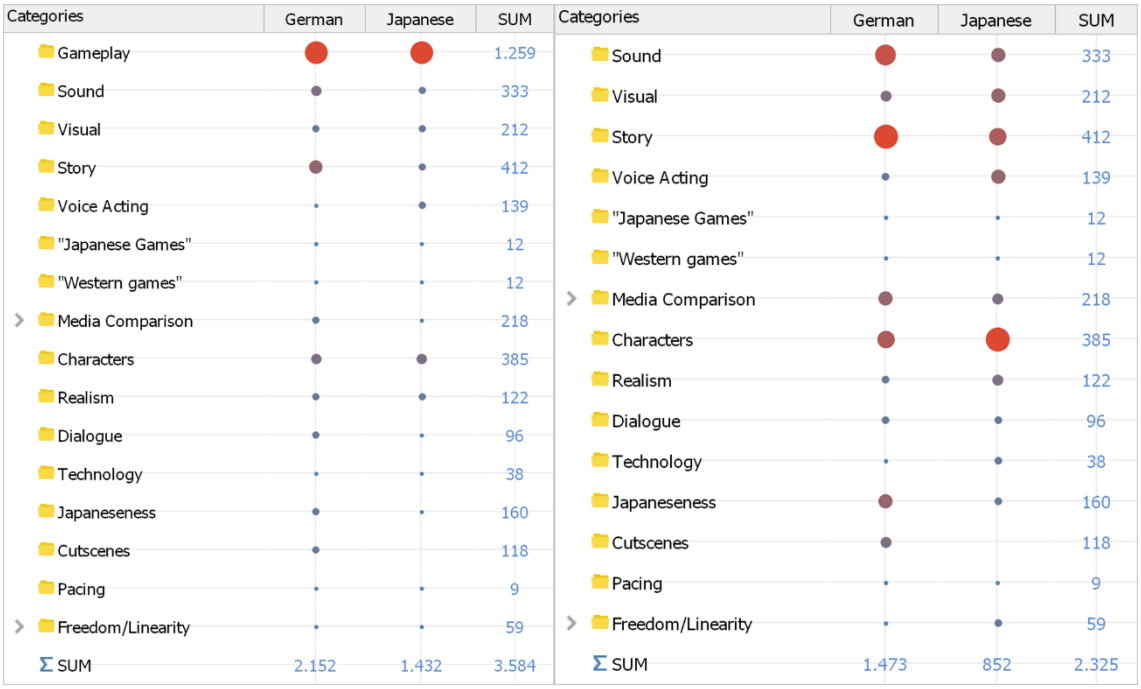
These categories are not disjunct. There is great overlap between, for example critical discussions of game elements and descriptions of the participant's sentiments. The concrete attribution of different forms of comments between participants is highly dependent on individual characteristics. However, non-surprisingly, there is some indication for a correlation between experience with games, in particular JRPGs, and more frequent critical discussions of the game mechanics.

In some cases, a lower frequency of utterances also appears to coincide with higher degrees of immersion. Five of the participants (three German, two Japanese) claimed for example that

they either “forgot to talk” during specific scenes or intense combat situations, as they were concentrating too much, or made comments such as “that was intense” after prolonged periods of silence in certain sequences of the games.

Generally, the topics mentioned by the participants of the TAP sessions conform to the results of the analysis of user reviews in concern to the themes discussed, albeit not necessary in their frequency. The participants related their experiences of the games to their mechanics, narrative and audio-visual elements. Like in the user reviews, they also made frequent comparisons to other games or media. User reviews tend to portray a greater variety of topics. However, the TAPs allow for a more detailed examination of the way the players’ experience specific sequences and elements of a game and make it possible to account for changes over time.

The analysis of word frequencies in the TAPs faces the same problem of inconsistent results for the Japanese document set as described for the analysis of user reviews. A cursory investigation reveals the high count of the word “cute” (*kawaii*, 258 hits) in the Japanese TAPs, which appears more frequently than for example “game” (*gēmu*, 226 hits), or “attack” (*kōgeki*, 119 hits). In the German reviews the word “battle” (*Kampf*, 212 hits) appears among the most frequent, before “character” (*Charakter*, 175).



Categories	German	Japanese	SUM
Gameplay			1.259
Sound			333
Visual			212
Story			412
Voice Acting			139
"Japanese Games"			12
"Western games"			12
Media Comparison			218
Characters			385
Realism			122
Dialogue			96
Technology			38
Japaneseness			160
Cutscenes			118
Pacing			9
Freedom/Linearity			59
Σ SUM	2.152	1.432	3.584

Categories	German	Japanese	SUM
Sound			333
Visual			212
Story			412
Voice Acting			139
"Japanese Games"			12
"Western games"			12
Media Comparison			218
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Realism			122
Dialogue			96
Technology			38
Japaneseness			160
Cutscenes			118
Pacing			9
Freedom/Linearity			59
Σ SUM	1.473	852	2.325

Figure 52 MAXQDA code matrix of the analysis of TAPs with the dictionary created for the analysis of user reviews, left with the category “Gameplay” and right without it

Figure 52 shows the results of analyzing the complete corpus of TAPs with the dictionary created for the analysis of user reviews. By far the most frequent mentions by German and

Japanese participants are made in concern to gameplay elements. This conforms to the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of user reviews. The right side of Figure 52 displays the code matrix without the category “Gameplay” for easier comparison. German participants more frequently mention the game’s overall story and sound, especially the soundtrack. Again, Japanese participants more frequently refer to the characters in the games. Japanese participants also made comparatively more frequent utterances on the realism and freedom of the games. The utterances of Japanese participants in concern to the “world” are mostly brief mentions of the games’ “worldview” (*sekaikan*).

Figure 53 displays the frequency of utterances per dictionary category and participant. Except for J01, J05, J08 and D08, the participants again generally most frequently mentioned the games’ gameplay elements. J01 shows a high frequency of utterances made on the realism of the game Dragon’s Dogma and an overall high frequency of utterances on the audio-visual elements of the games. In general, the allocation of topics is highly individual. Although Japanese participants appear overall to make comparatively frequent mentions of game characters, the same is true for D08 and D09. In the case of D08, this is however predominantly criticism at them being “too cute”, while D09 shows more similar responses to the Japanese participants, praising the overall character design and their personalities.

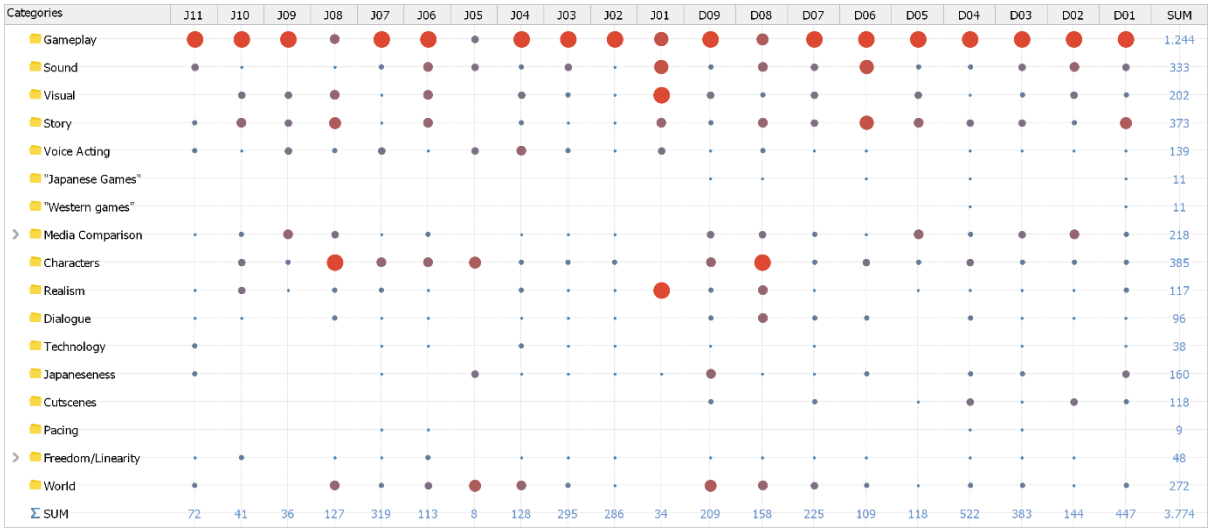

Figure 53 MAXQDA code matrix for the frequency of utterances per dictionary category for all participants

Below follows a close reading of the German and Japanese participants’ experiences evident in the TAPs for each of the selected games, first for the German, then for the Japanese document set. These close readings follow roughly the following pattern. For each game, information of the overall evaluation of the game by the participants is followed by a

description of utterances in concern to narrative elements, mechanics, audio-visual elements and further observations that do not fall into these categories.

Participants' summaries of the games, stated directly after their play session of each game, provide the most succinct and comprehensive form of data for their overall evaluation of each game. They were often highly detailed, with participants picking up on most points they touched upon during their play session. Arguable, the combination of TAP with a summary at the end has helped participants to order their thoughts and remember their experience, as they had already voiced them once. The impressions in the summaries are supplemented by selectively coded segments from the TAPs. Where not clear because of the contexts, citations of participants are indicated by the code for the participant and the played game. For example, "J01_DD" refers to the TAP, resulting from the first Japanese participant, playing the game Dragon's Dogma, while "D04_NK2" refers to the fourth German participant's TAP of the play sessions playing the game Ni no Kuni II.

4.2.2 Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

German Participants

Apart from participant D08, German participants' overall evaluation and comments made about the game Ni no Kuni II were generally positive. Participants D02 and D03 professed to have enjoyed the game the most, out of the four selected games for the TAP. Out of the nine German participants, none had played the game before, although D03 had played the predecessor of the game and D01, D02, D07 and D09 professed to at least have some knowledge about the franchise. Criticism of the game is largely consistent among all German participants and focused on its narrative elements, the pacing in the beginning of the game, and missing voiceovers for the characters. All participants mentioned that the high frequency of cutscenes and tutorials negatively impacted the game's flow. D04 goes into detail and compares this to his prior experiences with Western, games:

> **D05_NK2:** *[Mir] fällt auch auf, dass das Spiel auch durch die Dialoge unterbrochen wird, in denen ja recht wenig passiert. Was dann aber vermutlich einfach eine Designentscheidung sein könnte. Es fällt mir einfach als Unterschied auf, zwischen den westlichen Spielen die ich spiele und den japanische, auch wenn letzteres nur wenige waren.*

I also feel that the game is interrupted by the dialogue in which not much happen. This could be a design decision. I just notice this as a difference to the Western games I usually play and the Japanese, even though the latter are only few.

While one of the first impressions of D06, after less than 20 minutes of play time, was that the game is too often interrupted "by all these sequences". D09, who overall holds a positive view of the game, finds it "extremely frustrating that the game is so often interrupted". This is further expediated by the fact that many of the cutscenes within the game are not dubbed. Players must read significant amounts of text, if they want to follow the story. This again was mentioned by all participants. D04 for example finds this "strange":

D04_NK2: *[Das] ist einfach merkwürdig für mich. Es ist ja nicht nur dass diese Cutscene nur nicht gesprochen ist, sie ist auch noch sehr lang! Ich kann mir nicht vorstellen, dass jemand das alles liest, aber vielleicht ist das bei japanischen Spielen so üblich. Das sind also in etwa drei, vier, vielleicht sogar fünf Minuten ununterbrochen nur Text, ohne dass das Ganze mit Musik hinterlegt würde...*

[This] is just strange to me. It is not just that the cutscene isn't dubbed, it is also very long! I can't imagine anyone reading all this. But maybe that's common in Japanese games. But this are three, four, maybe five minutes of uninterrupted text without any form of background music…

D03 who has played the prior game in the Ni no Kuni franchise argues similarly. She was especially negatively surprised by the lack of a comprehensive dub, as this was one of the main factors that led to an immersive experience for her in the first game. This was one of her first impressions of the game, which she describes in the following way:

D03_NK2: *Erinnere ich mich jetzt falsch, oder war der erste Teil komplett synchronisiert? Ich hab das Gefühl, da fehlt irgendwas. […] Also, wenn ich mich richtig erinnere, war der erste Teil komplett durchsynchronisiert. Das fand ich sehr anheimelnd, weil es immer den Anschein erweckt hatte dass wir uns tatsächlich in einem Ghibli-Film befinden und wenn sich die jetzigen Konversationen darauf beschränken, wenn, „Ha!" oder „eh!" die einzigen Töne sind, die das ganze Geschehen unterstreichen weiß ich jetzt schon, dass ich mich ein bisschen schwer tun werde, mich daran zu gewöhnen.*

Am I remembering wrongly or was the first game completely dubbed? I have the feeling something is missing. […] So, If I remember correctly, the first game was completely dubbed. I really liked that, because it made one feel as if they really were in a Ghibli-movie. And if conversations are now limited to this, when "Ha!" Or "Eh!" are the only sounds, that accompany the events, then I already know, that It will be hard for me to get used to it.

D07 assumes that this might be because of budget restraints:

D07_NK2: *Das ist der König? Und warum sprechen die eigentlich nicht? Das finde ich jetzt ein bisschen nervig, dass es nicht vertont ist, aber... Vielleicht hat das Budget dafür nicht gereicht...? Ja, gerade bei so einer Anfangsszene, wenn man vorhin schon eine Vertonung hatte, ja, da würde ich mir eine komplette Vertonung wünschen.*

That's the king? And why don't they talk? That's a bit annoying, that they didn't sub this, but… Maybe the budget wasn't enough? Yes, especially for such a scene in the beginning, and we already had a completely dubbed scene before this, I would like a dub.

During the next dubbed cutscene in the game, he comes back to this arguing that:

D07_NK2: *Also das ist jetzt wieder komplett vertont, die Synchronsprecher gefallen mir auch sehr gut... Der hier auch. Da haben sie schon ein bisschen Mühe reingesteckt. Schade dass sie das nicht durchgezogen haben.*

So, this is again fully dubbed. I also like the voice actor… this one as well. They really did make an effort here. Too bad that they didn't see it through.

Participants D04 and D07 also expressed difficulties in understanding the standards for which scenes where provided with a dub and which were not. D04 contemplated during his play session, whether only central scenes to advance the games plot were fully voiced but claimed that he did not feel this was necessarily the case:

D04_NK2: *An dieser Stelle ist es so, dass die Szene tatsächlich gesprochen ist, obwohl es Texte gibt, die man weiterclickt. Keine Cutscene wie zuvor. Also die*

Unterscheidung ist mir tatsächlich nicht klar, weil diese Szene auch für die Story nicht so unendlich wichtig zu sein scheint.

In this case, the scene is dubbed, even though [the dialogue is presented as] texts that can be clicked away. No cutscene like before. I really don't understand the differentiation, especially as this scene doesn't appear all that important to the story.

D07 mentions that the missing dub during scenes where new characters are introduced takes away from the characterization of these characters. Such feelings of bewilderment are also constantly expressed towards the game's narrative elements, its overall plot and characters. The opening scene of the game shows how the president of a fictional version of the United States is transported into a fantasy world after he apparently dies in a nuclear attack on the city he is headed towards. He goes on to help the dethroned young king of this fantasy world to reclaim his throne.

All German participants reacted during their play sessions towards the way the main character acts after he is transported into the eponymous fantasy world of "Ni no Kuni". They negatively comment on how quickly he seems to accept his new fate without questioning it and how he seems to adapt too quickly into the new circumstances. D04, D06 and D07 for example wonder why the supposed former president of the United states shows a high proficiency with swords. D01 wonders that "I understand he is the president, but how can he just accept [this] world", while D07 argues that he "doesn't seem surprised at all". D03 finds it "strange" how the character seems to form a bond with the game's deuteragonist within the first 20 minutes of the game. The missing dubs in the game further seem to contribute towards this impression, as all German players criticized the "walls of text" that need to be read to follow the game's story. D01, D05, D07 and D08 started to skip the dialogue halfway through the game.

The German participants also made frequent mentions of perceived inconsistencies in the story, for example on whether it was necessary for the character Nele to sacrifice herself (D02, D07, D08). Participant D01 criticized the story of the game for its naïve premise and felt that characters lacked depth. D07 summarizes his experience of the game's story in the following way:

D07_NK2: *Story […] da bin ich jetzt nicht so mitgekommen. Das ist irgendwie, dieser Präsident […] aus Amerika oder so ähnlich, sein Land oder seine Stadt wurde*

zerstört. Ich glaube durch eine Atombombe. [Das] hat ihn dann nicht weiter gestört als er dann in diese andere Welt versetzt wurde. Der hat dann einfach sein Ding weiter gemacht und gesagt er bleibt jetzt hier um diesem kleinen Jungen zu helfen König zu werden. Als Präsident eigentlich ne Nullnummer. Sein Land wird angegriffen und ihn kümmert das jetzt aber scheinbar gar nicht mehr. […] Ja, finde ich ein bisschen weit hergeholt. Ein bisschen merkwürdig.

Story […] I couldn't really follow it. Somehow there is the president of America or something like that, his country or city was destroyed. I think through an atomic bomb. Being transported to another world didn't really face him. He just continued on and says: I am going to stay here to help this small boy to become king. As president a failure. His country is attacked, and he doesn't seem to care at all. […] Yes, a bit farfetched. A bit strange.

While the overall evaluation of the game's plot appears similar among German participants, the concrete evaluation of specific elements of the narrative varies. D06 for example stated that he enjoyed the humor and wordplays within the game, as well as its narrative structure, being segmented into chapters and praised the story for its coherence:

D06_NK2: *Geil, finde ich lustig. Also Humor ist auch mit drin im Spiel, finde ich echt witzig! Auch diese Kapitelunterteilung finde ich super. Das ist wirklich eine Geschichte in der man mitspielt. Und nicht so zusammenhangslos wie andere Spiele.*

Great, I think that's funny. So there is also humor in this game, I think that's really funny! I also really like this separation into chapters. This is really a story in which you participate. And not as incoherent as in other games.

D09 positively mentioned several scenes in the game claiming that they were references to scenes from Japanese Anime:

D09_NK2: *Ich fands spannend mit den ganzen Referenzen. Oder ich vermute mal, dass es Referenzen sind. Sei es Akira am Anfang. Oder halt die Szene wo Nele sich aufopfert, die sieht so aus wie aus Dragon Ball.*

> It was interesting to me with all the references. Or at least I assume they were references. Be it to Akira in the beginning. Or the scene where Nele sacrifices herself, which looks like in Dragon Ball.

D08 on the other hand remarked that he thought the humor was too "childish" and repeatedly called the plot of the game "absurd" or "superficial". The word "superficial" was also used by D03 and D04 to refer to the game's dialogue and characters.

The games systems and mechanics were generally met with less criticism by the participants. Aside from some comments by D01 and D04 on the game's controls and by D03 and D04 on the presence of "invisible walls" within the game that limit the freedom of players to move, utterances on the ludic elements of Ni no Kuni II were mainly directed at the game's combat system. In contrast to its predecessor, Ni no Kuni II uses a real-time combat system, instead of turn-based combat. This was met with disappointment by D01 and D03, who claim to have preferred a turn-based combat system. D03 mentions this directly, as she argues that:

> **D03_NK2:** *Ah, okay. Das ist aber doof. Ah, das ist, ah! Okay der Strategiekampf wird, hat sich jetzt auf die Battlearea beschränkt. Finde ich aber doof. Das finde ich ein bisschen... Warum habt ihr denn nicht gleich normale Strategiekämpfe gemacht? Rundenbasierte?*
>
> Oh, okay. But that's stupid. Oh, that is, yeah. Okay, the strategic battle is now limited to the battle area. I don't like that. I think that's…Why didn't you just do normal strategic battle? Turn-based?

Interestingly, after being able to use a different character in combat for the first time, D07 did not react for several seconds after the battle started. He expressed that he had subconsciously thought that combat would be turn-based and did therefore not take any action until he was attacked by a computer-controlled enemy. On the other hand, D04 and D05 felt too restricted by the combat system and mentioned the clear separation between travelling over the map and fighting:

> **D04_NK2:** *In diesem Spiel gibt es ein System wie ich es aus ähnlichen Spielen aus Japan kenne, dass sehr stark zwischen einer Kampfsituation und einer normalen Spielsituation unterschieden wird. Das ist mir aus westlichen spielen weniger*

bekannt muss ich sagen. Nimmt für mich zumindest ein bisschen was aus dem Spielfluss heraus.

In this game, there is a system as I know it from similar games from Japan, that there is a very strong differentiation between a combat situation and a normal game situation. I have to say, that I am not really used to that from Western games. For me at least, it takes away from the game flow.

D05_NK2: *Wenn man in den Kampf geht ladet wieder der andere Bildschirm und man kann nicht rausgehen. Die Szenenwechsel sind ein bisschen mühsam.*

When you go into a fight, the other screen loads again, and you cannot get out of it. These scene changes are a bite cumbersome.

Aside from this, however, the combat system was largely praised by the participants during their play sessions. D01 summarized his impressions on the combat system after about one hour in the game the following way:

D01_NK2: *Das Kampfsystem gefällt mir sehr! Ganz ehrlich! Es fühlt sich befriedigend an, auf die coolen hässlichen Viecher zu kloppen, Magie sieht schön aus!*

I really enjoy the combat system! Really! It feels satisfying to just swing away at these ugly beasts. Magic looks also great!

D06 appears to feel similarly:

D06_NK2: *Oh, der nächste Kampf. Also die Kämpfe machen auf jeden Fall Spaß. Wie gesagt, die Details auch super. […] Auch coole Combos, mit den Spezialattacken. Ja, die Kämpfe nerven aber auch teilweise so ein bisschen. Ich denke die braucht man zum Leveln. Woah! Aber sehr actionreich auf jeden Fall! Viele Explosionen!*

Oh, the next fight. So, the battles are definitely fun. As I said, the details are great. […] And cool combos with the special attacks. Yes, the battles are sometimes a bit

annoying as well. But I think they are necessary to level up. Woah! But definitely full of action! Lots of explosions!

D06's criticism of the frequency of battles is also shared by the participants D04 and D07 and D09, who mentioned feeling that the battles were repetitive, partially through the use of similar enemies, but also state that the depth of the system makes it possible to use various ways to fight and therefore provides some variety:

D04_NK2: *Insbesondere in dieser Situation zeigt sich wieder, dass die Kämpfe ausgesprochen schnell langweilend wirken können, denn man befindet sich wieder in einer ähnlichen Kampagnenkarte wie zuvor. Und die Gegner bleiben und haben sich nicht verändert. […] Die Gegner sind zwar relativ repetitiv, aber das Kampfsystem ist denke ich darauf ausgelegt, genug Möglichkeiten zu bieten auf verschiedene Art mit ihnen zu kämpfen. Ich glaube das ist eher, worauf hier der Fokus gelegt wurde.*

Especially in this situation, it is again apparent that combat can quickly grow tedious, as we are again on a similar campaign map as before. And the enemies remain and didn't change. […] The enemies may be repetitive, but I think the combat system is designed to provide enough possibilities to fight in different kinds of ways. I think this may have been the focus here.

D09_NK2: *Teilweise waren in den Kämpfen zu oft die gleichen Gegner verwendet... An sich war aber genug Abwechslung da. Das Kampfsystem war spannend. Mit den Fernkampfwaffen... Die Kämpfe waren zu einfach vielleicht, aber das kann man ja umstellen.*

Partially, in combat the same enemies were used too often… Overall, there was however enough variation. The combat system was exciting. With the long-distance weapons… The battles might have been too easy, but one can change that.

Frequently mentioned was the difficulty of the battles, which most players felt were too easy. D08 had one particular problem with the combat system, he found it too colorful, claiming repeatedly that the "flashes" and "numbers" that appear during combat annoyed him. This is consistent with his overall negative impressions on the artistic style of the game which he claims to "dislike, especially these small anime figures" wishing for a more realistic graphical

depiction “with blood”. This form of “sensory overload” (D02_NK2) was also criticized by D01 and D02.

The participants aside from D08 generally made positive utterances towards the visual aspects of the game. D01, D02, D03 and D09 likened the artistic style to movies produced by Studio Ghibli[25]. D03 and D09 were highly knowledgeable about Ghibli productions and identified similarities in design with concrete movies. The word “cute” (“süß”, “niedlich”, “knuffig”) was frequently used by all participants in their descriptions. During his play session, D05 praised the design of the landscapes three times, calling it “cool”. D04 mentions that:

> **D04_NK2:** *Ähm, die Entwickler scheinen sich Mühe gegeben haben, eine nette, abwechslungsreiche Welt zu erschaffen. Die ist also durchaus schön anzusehen. Das ist schön, damit man etwas zu sehen hat, während man sich in eine Phase befindet wo man quasi zwischen Kämpfen einfach ein wenig über die Karte läuft.*
>
> The developers apparently put effort into creating a nice varied world. It is quite nice to look at. That’s good so one has something to look at, during the phases where you traverse the map, between battles.

After encountering the “higgledies” small creatures that can aid the player during combat, D03 exclaims that they are “so cute” and that she finds it “interesting how different art styles and drawing styles “work together while clashing with each other” in the game world. Aside from the art design, D01, D05, D08 and D09 do however mention that they think the graphic is “outdated by modern standards” (D01_NK2) and “just doesn’t look all that good” (D08_NK2).

More direct criticism was directed at the design of the world map, that is the traversable overworld, of the game. During travel over the world map, the artistic style of the game changes drastically. The normally detailed depiction of characters is replaced by deformed miniature characters. The overworlds graphic representation also differs from the detailed design of other instances of the game. While D01, D02 and D03 generally found the artistic style here to be “cute” the other participants commented negatively when first encountering this. D01, D03 and D09 use the term “chibi”, taken from Japanese when referring to the change in art style. The term originally means “small” in Japanese and showcases their familiarity with Japanese

[25] Studio Ghibli was directly involved in the artwork for the predecessor to Ni no Kuni II. Staff from Studio Ghibli was also involved in the production of this game.

popular culture, where it is commonly used to describe an artistic style in which characters are displayed in a small and deformed way, with over proportionally large heads. D01 and D03 use the term in a positive context, while D09 criticizes this design decision:

D01_NK2: *Es ist knuffig. Vor allem diese Chibi-version von dem Ganzen. Von diesen ganzen Monstern und den Charakteren sind ja voll knuffig.* This is cute. Especially this chibi-version of it all. Of all the monsters and characters, they are really cute.
D03_Nk2: *Und das ist süß! Oh, das ist süß, das gefällt mir! Die Chibi-Charaktere gefallen mir sehr gut!* And that is cute! Oh, that is cute! I like it. I really like the chibi-characters very much!
D09_NK2: *Diese Chibicharaktere sind wirklich missplatziert hier. Ich weiß nicht. Irgendwie stört mich die... Ästhetik der Weltkarte in dem Kontext. Dabei finde ich es wirklich schön, wie klassisch das Spiel dann doch ist, in dem Sinne, dass es eine Weltkarte hat. Auch interessante Vehikel. Dass erinnert mich dann tatsächlich an die PS1 Final Fantasy Zeit.* These chibi characters are really misplaced here. I don't know. Somehow, I'm bothered by… the aesthetics of the world map in this context. Even though I really like how classic the game is, in the sense that it has a world map. Interesting vehicles, also. That really reminds me of the PS1 Final Fantasy age.

D09 makes here an interesting reference. While he criticizes the concrete artistic implementation, he also proclaims to like the inclusion of a traversable world map mechanic within the game. This leads him to refer to the game as "classic" as it reminds him of older games in the Final Fantasy franchise. During his play session, he brought this up multiple times. For instance, in his first encounter with the world map, he stated the following:

D09_NK2: *[Sieht] das grade merkwürdig aus! Obwohl… ich finde das auch super interessant, diese Weltkarte. Das erinnert mich irgendwie an die Spiele für die PlayStation 1. Um ehrlich zu sein, fände ich es gut, wenn Square Enix das wieder in Final Fantasy implementieren würde. Okay, aber die Weltkarte passt überhaupt nicht zum Rest des Spiels. Alles ist in Animeoptik. Das wirkt viel realistischer.*

This looks really strange just now! Although… I think it is super interesting as well, this world map. This somehow reminds me of games for PlayStation 1. To be honest, I would like it if Square Enix would implement this into Final Fantasy again. Okay, but the world map doesn't fit at all with the rest of the game. Everything is in anime style, but this looks more realistic.

In contrast to D09 or also D07, who appear used to the implementation of traversable world maps, D04 and D05 react to the change in graphic style with bewilderment:

D04_NK2: *Ok, es scheint sich also gerade vollständig die Darstellungsweise geändert zu haben... Bin mir nicht sicher woran das liegt. Es kommt mir doch etwas merkwürdig vor. Diese Charaktere sehen im Reisemodus tatsächlich signifikant anders aus, als im eigentlichen Kampfmodus im Spiel. Das ist für mich sehr auffällig, dass sowohl die Charaktere als auch die gesamte Geräuschkulisse, das Vorgehen an sich erstmal sehr stark verniedlicht worden sind.*

Okay, it looks as tough the art style just changed completely… I'm not sure why. It seems strange to me. The characters indeed look significantly different in the journey mode than in the normal combat mode of the game. That is very striking to me, that the characters, as well as the soundscape and the whole procedure were strongly made to look cuter.

D05_NK2: *Das ist ein offenes Terrain. Mehr Möglichkeiten wahrscheinlich. Und... total andere Ansicht. Sehr speziell... Wir haben jetzt so kleine Minifiguren...*

This is an open terrain. More possibilities, I guess. And… we have a completely different perspective. Very strange… We now have small mini figures…

D09 goes into more detail on his opinion on the world map. Like D06, he does not appear to enjoy the graphic style of the world map, claiming that the small figures depicting the player character do not fit into the overall art style of the game, calling them "too abstract". This pertains to a last point of contention between the TAPs of the German participants on Ni no Kuni II, the degree of realism of the graphic style. While D01, D02, D03, D06 and D09 do not negatively comment upon the anime-like style of the game and D09 instead even criticizes that the "too realistic" look of the world map clashes with the overall design of the game, D04, D05

D07 and especially D08 mention that they would have preferred a more realistic art style, as they felt that the design of the game was “childish” (D04_NK2; D05_NK2; D08_NK2), “too cute” (D07; D08) and overall “too unrealistic” (D05; D08).

The game’s soundtrack was mentioned less frequently by the participants. D01mentions repeatedly that he “likes the music”, while D05 and D07 simply find it “nice”. D02 was at first reminded of the Nutcracker, but later mentions that she felt the music to be “menacing” and “scary”, while D04 calls it “too melodramatic”. D06 mentions after approximately one hour of playing that the music was “annoying” but later comments upon it more positively, calling the soundtrack “varied” and “fitting to the locations”. For D08, the game’s soundtrack was at first one of the few elements of the game he commented positively on. However, he later called it “too sentimental”, stating that it “bothered him. D09 only commented on the music once, stating that it “reminds me of Final Fantasy”.

During the play sessions, several participants made comments to the “Japaneseness” of the game Ni no Kuni. They linked the artistic style and the overall plot of the game and its characters to the Japanese origin of the game. D01 for example believes that the decision to depict the president of the fictional version of the United States as the main character was done because “a Japanese audience probably thinks that’s cool”. D01, D02 and D03 mention that the main character, despite his name being Roland and him being the president of the “United States” “looks very Japanese”. D01 later goes on to argue, that the characters in the game are based on “archetypes from Japanese anime”, which “makes it easier to tell a story” but also leads to “stereotypes” that “can make them boring”. D04 links aspects of the game design that he finds strange, for example the frequent appearance of undubbed texts and cut scenes to the game’s Japanese origin, mentioning that “maybe that is normal in Japanese games”.

Japanese participants

Of the eleven Japanese participants, none professed to have played the game before, altough J06 had played the predecessor, and J03, J05 and J10 had heard about the franchise before. In many aspects, the Japanese participants’ reported experiences and evaluations on Ni no Kuni match those of the German players. Similar to the complaints by the German participants, J08 for example mentions that he dislikes the “long introduction phase” in which he felt constantly interrupted in his play time.

Although not completely clear from the TAPs, the game’s story appears to have been received more positively by the Japanese participants or was at least less frequently criticized during the

play sessions and in the interviews. While the German participants frequently questioned the way the main character behaves, after being transported to another world, this was rarely touched upon by the Japanese participants. For example, only J04 reacted to the main character's apparent proficiency with swords, despite being the president of the fictional United States:

> **J04_NK2:** *うん？この人..武家の達人なのか？[...] これはクーデターだ 。まあこの人大統領だからね そういうの詳しいのかな 。この人状況把握すごすぎだろ。やっぱ大統領だからか 物分かりが良すぎるな。*
>
> Hm? Is he… A martial artist? […] This is a coup d'état. Well, he is a president, so maybe he is knowledgeable about such things. This man's ability to grasp the situation is just too good. Maybe because he is the president, but he just understands things too quickly.

While German participants frequently displayed bewilderment or astonishment towards the way the main character was transported into another world, this was not mentioned by the Japanese participants. Instead, J03 and J07 appear to quickly have grasped the basic premise of the story and plot elements, as they link them towards a common theme or genre in Japanese popular culture, in which characters from our world are transported to a parallel world. The genre is commonly termed *isekai mono* ("other world story") or *isekai tensei* ("reborn in another world")[26].

> **J03_NK2:** *まぁねえ…異世界転生あるあるかな…携帯が圏外。転生ではないのか。ふふっ、かわいいなー。おぉ、言うねー。ロウランさん、あなた度胸ありすぎじゃないですか。刃物を突き付けられて、普通に会話するって強すぎる。*
>
> Well, that's… common in *isekai tensei* settings, that the cellphone is out of range. It's not really *tensei* [i.e. reborn] here. Ha, so cute! Oh, well said! Roland you have guts. You are able to talk, despite being threatened by a blade.

[26] For a more detailed explanation, see the Wikipedia article on "isekai" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isekai).

J07_NK2: *ああ...あれかなんか転送みたいな感じですかね？あのファンタジーに現代のやつが入り込んじゃうみたいな [...] 適応力がありすぎますね... なんか... 最近のあんまりよくみてないんでなんとも言えないけど、なんかそう異世界転生ものの主人公みたいな...感じになってる。流行りなのかなあ、こういうの。*

Oh, so this is that, right… like being sent over? Like where a normal guy from our time enters a fantasy world. […] He has a high ability to adapt. This is like, I'm not watching it all that much lately, so I can't really talk about it, but he is like the main character in the "isekai tensei" genre. Is this popular right now?

The *isekai* genre was also mentioned by participant J04 in his interview. He mentioned that he enjoyed Ni no Kuni II the most out of all selected games, as he liked "*isekai* stories" and the game "fits well into that".

While all German participants mentioned that the game was only partially dubbed during their playthroughs, and several participants made frequent mentions about the choice for dubbing some dialogue but not others, only J07 showed a reaction towards this. This is despite the fact, that the Japanese participants made comparatively frequent mentions to the game's dub and voice actors. J03 praised the "great voice" of the game's main character and mentioned that he has a voice like a "good looking guy". J07 wonders who the voice actor of another character is, claiming that he sounds "like an old guy". Such detailed discussions of the game's dub are largely absent among German participants, with the exception of D03, who claimed that she generally preferred Japanese dub, as English voice actors in general remind her of "bad anime dubs".

Comments towards the game's story where overall less frequent among the Japanese participants. Like several German participants, J11 thought the story was "childish, maybe because it is from [the developer] Level-5". His main complaint was that "events unfolded too quickly" and too many events were just "skipped". Close to the end of her session, J05 mentions that the story "finally advanced, it took so long." J07 simply stated that he found the story "interesting" and would like to know how it will unfold. J06 elaborates on his impression during his play session.

J07_NK2: *ストーリーはま、ストーリーも申し分ない。ま、途中までしかやってないんでわかんないんですけど。まあ少なくとも最初の方わかりやすいファンタジーから入っててすごい心躍るものがありましたっていう感じですかね。*

I don't have any complaints about the story. Well, I only played for a while, so I can't really say, but at least in the beginning, I think, it started as an easy to understand fantasy an provided plenty of excitement.

J03 links her impressions and expectations of the story mostly to the characters but also claims to enjoy the linearity of how the plot is conveyed to the player.

J03_NK2: *でもこの、このゲームすごい一方通行でやりやすいなぁ。寄り道というよりかはどちらかというとストーリー楽しむほうが好きなのでありがたい。寄り道するの好きだけど。そうなんだよな…お互いに指導者って立場だからこの2人なかなかいいコンビになるんじゃないの？*

But this, this game is really nice to play as it is very straightforward. Since I prefer enjoying the story over making detours, I am grateful for that. I also like making detours tough. Yes… They are both rulers and will make a great combo.

Regarding Ni no Kuni II's mechanics, Japanese participants show largely similar reactions as the German participants, although they tend to be less critical in their utterances. The focus of the Japanese participants lies on the battle system as well. J03, for example is generally positive about it, and mentioned feeling slightly frustrated as cutscenes were too long and kept her from fighting. Although she also frequently mentioned that she found battles "too easy".

J03_NK2: *え、レベ上げしたーい。戦闘楽しいから戦闘したーい。レベ上げさして？戦闘したーい。 ね、アクション戦闘か好きなんだよね、ある程度簡単な操作でバチバチと人倒せるの好きなんだよなぁ。[...] やっぱでも戦*

闘楽しいんだよねー…やっぱり。[...] やっぱ戦闘は手応えがないと面白くない。[...] 意外と戦闘は簡単。難しくはない。

I want to level up! Combat is fun so I want to fight! Let me level-up? I want to fight! I like action combat. Defeating enemies left and right with relatively simple controls, I like that. […] Still, combat is really fun. […] Well, combat is no fun after all, if it's not challenging. […] Combat is easier than expected. Not difficult at all.

J09 also mentioned that she found the combat sequences in the game easy. She however put this in a positive light, arguing that "as the party does all the hard work for me, I can just enjoy the game". J04 found the controls difficult to remember. This confirms to criticism by J06 and J11 who both found that there were too many systems in the game. J06 phrased this as there being "too much gameplay" in the game, while J11 simply stated that too many "unneeded" elements were in the game.

J06_NK2: *ちょっと、ゲームプレイ、ゲームとして要素が多かったかな。多すぎかなぁと思ったところすごいありました。ちょっと名前忘れちゃったんですけどあのふわふわしている生き物のやつとか、あとマップキー、スキル、であったり、あと武器の入れ替えだったり。ちょっと何かまあ、ゲームすごいやってる人からしたらそんな多くないんだろうけど、初めてプレイするからせるとちょっと、何か全部を駆使してプレーするのは難しいのかなと思いました。んでまぁ僕は結構難しいところは省いて単純に武器の入れ替えところもなく、ただたが叩いて遊んでたんですけど。*

There were too many gameplay, game elements I think. There were many moments when I thought there were too many. I forgot the name, but these small creatures, the map key, skill, and so on. Like the weapon switch. What was that? I mean, for people that really play a lot it might not be so much, but for someone who plays for the first time, I think it is hard to utilize it fully. Well, I skipped over the hard parts and didn't switch weapons and played by just hitting [the enemies].

J11_NK2: *思ったよりもアクション面とかモーションとかはしっかりしていいとなっていう部分があったんすけど、まあ、音楽もいいし、絵もいいし。とやっぱこれ、いるかな？みたいなが... 例えば、さっきの、進軍モードみたいないるかなーっていうの。*

The action and motions were better than I expected, and the music and graphic were also good. However, there are [elements] where I thought "is this necessary?". For example, the [skirmish battle] just now. Do we need that?

J07 argues that the action-based combat system, with a relatively high freedom of movement, prevents combat from becoming repetitive although he is unsure if this will still be the case later in the game, once players have formed habits in how they behave and move during combat. J10 generally praised the combat in the game but would have preferred "if more RPG elements were included", such as more collectible items or side quests.

Japanese participants' utterances in concern to Ni no Kuni II's artistic style were generally positive. J01, who criticized various elements of the game in the post play interview, still found that it had the "best character design" among the four selected games. Like the German participants, all Japanese participants referred to the game's art style or characters as "cute", that is as *kawaii*[27]. Unlike for some of the German participants, "cuteness" here does however not appear to be negatively connotated. While D04, D05, D07 and D08 argue for example that the characters are "too cute" and therefore "childish", or "corny", such criticism is not found by the Japanese participants. As with D03 and D09, several Japanese participants were reminded of Studio Ghibli productions (e.g. J02, J04, J07). J06 explicitly mentions this in the following way.

J06_NK2: *絵とかがすごい好きで、ジブリっぽい絵でー、結構好みなんですね、で、えっとー音楽も bgm とかは割ともう本当にジブリっぽくて、それはもう今パッケージ見たら久石譲さんだったんで、そうなんだろうって思*

[27] See Nittono (2016) for a more detailed discussion of the term and its function in Japan.

ったんですけど。てグラフィックとかも申し分ないぐらいに好きだったんです

I really like the design. The Ghibli-like design is really to my liking. And, well the music and bgm are also really Ghibli-like. While looking at the package I noticed it was Mr. Hisaishi. I thought so. So, about the graphics as well, there is nothing to complain about.

J08, found the graphic more "anime-like" than expected but mentions that "I think RPGs are just like that". J02 also argues that she normally prefers "beautiful graphics like in Monster Hunter" over an "anime look". Aside from these two, however, the other Japanese participants did not link the game directly to other anime or manga, as the German participants frequently did. J03 instead mentions the game being like a "picture book" or "oil painting", calling the design "extremely cute" with "beautiful textures". The design of the world map criticized by some of the German participants was also met with more positive utterances by the Japanese participants. J03 for example repeatedly calls the "deformed" design "extremely cute" and J02 and J10 expressed that they "really had fun in exploring the beautiful world" (J10). Explicitly negative comments were only observed for J07, who felt the game's graphics were inferior to the other games he played during the sessions and for J09, who felt that "the switch between 2D and 3D graphics felt weird". Utterances on the game's soundtrack appeared less frequent and generally only praised "the good music".

4.2.3 Kingdom Hearts III

German Participants

Kingdom Hearts III is the third entry into the Kingdom Hearts franchise, a series of action RPGs that combine characters from Square Enix's Final Fantasy franchise with characters and worlds from Disney movies. The reactions of German participants to the game Kingdom Hearts III were generally more negative than compared to Ni no Kuni II. Except for D09, who had played the game before and saw it as his favorite game among the four selected games for the TAP sessions, all participants proclaimed that they either enjoyed it the least or second least of the four games. Negative sentiments were apparent in regard to practically all elements of the game.

First, the story of Kingdom Hearts III was frequently being mentioned to be inaccessible to the player. D01, D07 and D09 had played the prior entries into the Kingdom Hearts franchise, while D04 remembered during his session, that he had played the first game before. Nevertheless, even D01 and D07 who expressed that they thought they were well-versed in the franchise's overall story, frequently mentioned their inability or disinterest in further following the plot.

Kingdom Hearts III offers its players the option to watch cinematic summaries of the previous games in the franchise. D04 and D06 watched all of them but felt that they still had "no idea what the game is about" (D06_KH3) and were more directed towards fans to help them "refresh their memories" (D04_KH3), instead of introducing new players to the franchise. D04 argues that:

> **D04_KH3:** *Diese Sequenzen sind gut gemacht, aber auf der einen Seite sind sie zu kurz, um tatsächlich die Geschichte nachzuvollziehen, auf der anderen aber auch ein bisschen länglich, wenn man tatsächlich alle fünf davon anschauen muss. […] Wenn man tatsächlich zum ersten Mal spielt, sind sie weitgehend unverständlich. Ohne die konkrete Backgroundstory von diesem Spiel, wenn man noch nicht gespielt hat, wirken diese Videos einfach nur melodramatisch.*
>
> These sequences are well made, but on the one hand they are too short to really understand the story and on the other somewhat longish, if you really watch all five of them. […] If one you really play for the first time, they are basically incomprehensible. Without the concrete background story of the game, if you haven't played it, the videos just appear melodramatic.

The game itself begins with a cinematic intro sequence, followed by a music video underlaid by a song from the popular Japanese singer Hikaru Utada. The quality of this intro sequence was generally praised by the participants although the overall meaning of the cut scene and music video appears to have been unclear to the participants except for D09, who had played the game before.

> **D09_KH3:** *Bevor ich das durchgespielt hatte, hatte ich das alles nicht so verstanden. Aber jetzt macht es Sinn. […] Und schon wieder. Ich sehe sehr viele Anspielungen auf da Ende jetzt, die ich davor nicht gesehen habe. Es macht eigentlich jetzt Spaß*

und ist für mich interessanter, mit dem Wissen von dem Ende da reinzugehen. Das ist irgendwie sehr typisch für Kingdom Hearts. Diese Sequenz finde ich toll. Das ist eigentlich eine ordentliche Zusammenfassung von was vorher passiert ist glaube ich.

Before I played through the game, I didn't really get all this. But now it makes sense. […] And again. I see a lot of references to the ending now, that I didn't see the last time. It's fun and is more interesting now, to watch this while knowing the ending. That's somehow typical for Kingdom Hearts. I love this sequence! That's a great summary of what's happened before.

Watching these first scenes, D01 and D07, who had both played the prior games in the Kingdom Hearts franchise felt that they did not really understand what it was about.

D07_KH3: *Okay, ich weiß nicht wirklich worüber die reden. Also keine Ahnung was hier passiert und um was es geht. Die Charaktere kenn ich nicht. Ja, okay. Also Musik und Grafik gefallen mir, aber keine Ahnung um was es hier gehen soll.*

Okay, I don't really know what they are talking about. No idea what's happening here and what it's about. I don't know the characters. So, I like the music and graphics, but no idea what this is all about.

D01_KH3: *Ich weiß nicht was sie mir damit sagen wollen, außer vielleicht ein Musikvideo. Im Intro. Es ist schön, aber was soll mir das sagen?*

I don't know, what they are trying to tell me, except [that it is] a music video. The intro. It's beautiful but what are they trying to tell me?

D01 links his difficulties in following the game's plot to the "complicated" story of the Kingdom Hearts franchise.

D01_KH3: *Die Story von Kingdom Hearts ist kompliziert. Ich will nicht sagen, dass sie komplex ist. Einfach nur kompliziert, weil... Kapitalismus? Es mussten halt mehrere nach dem Erfolg von den ersten zwei Spielen, mussten die ja noch Geld rausholen. Wahrscheinlich wussten sie das Kingdom Hearts III nicht schnell kommen würde, deswegen haben die es erst mal so gemacht, dass es für kleinere Konsolen sowie Handhelds und so, vieles rausbringen.*

> The story of Kingdom Hearts is complicated. I don't want to say complex, just complicated. Because, …. Capitalism? After the success of the first two game, they had to make more money. They probably knew that Kingdom Hearts III wouldn't come anytime soon, so they started to publish games for smaller consoles and handhelds, etc.

What D01 refers to here is the fact that games in the Kingdom Hearts franchise were published on different platforms, arguably aimed at different target groups, while still sharing a common narrative. Understanding of Kingdom Hearts III's plot is therefore partially limited by the participants knowledge of prior entries. Among the German participants, D01, D04, D07 and D09 had prior experiences with the game. However, only D09, who had played Kingdom Hearts III before, argued that he was able to follow the story.

The other participants impressions of the game's plot are not influenced by prior knowledge of the franchise. Per se, this did not necessarily seem to negatively influence their experience and evaluation of the game's narrative elements as they were instead focusing more on the concrete events within Kingdom Hearts III. Despite its inaccessibility, participants mentioned during the beginning of their play session that they found it "interesting" and made guesses as to how the themes in the sequence would play out in the game. D03 provides a good example for this.

> **D03_KH3:** *Also bisher wird das Opening den Anforderungen die das Spiel an sich selbst zu stellen scheint doch gerecht. Sehr stimmungsvoll! Mir gefällt auch der etwas dunkle Unterton ganz gut. Also wenn der Animationsstandard aus diesem Opening im Spiel auch gehalten wird, dann bin ich... allein schon von der Grafik relativ begeistert. Aber mal sehen.*
>
> So, as of now, the opening appears to live up to the expectations the game evokes. Very atmospheric! I also really like the dark undertones. So, when the standard of animation in this opening carries over to the game, then… I'm relatively awed by the graphic alone. But let's see.

D08, who was overall the most negative about this game, also appeared to hold higher expectations because of the opening scene. Even though he had never played another game in the franchise before, he professed to be interested in the "contrast between dark and light" that was presented in the opening. D01, D04 and D06 mentioned similar feelings during the intro sequence. As D07 mentioned in the post-play interview, these expectations "did however not

survive the cutscenes after the intro". The most frequent complaint about the game among German participants was the high frequency of cutscenes. Except for D09, who had played the game before and skipped the cutscenes, all German participants mentioned feeling disturbed by their high frequency. In total, the word "cutscene" was mentioned 62 times by German participants, more often than for example the normally central term "combat system" (36).

D01 for example mentions that to him, cutscenes are normally a reward. However, the high frequency of cutscenes makes it impossible to feel rewarded by them. The other participants make similar points. D02 called the frequent cutscenes "annoying" claiming that she wants to play instead of watch. D03 started to skip them after about one hour into the game, claiming that "it makes my hard bleed to skip cutscenes, but this is just too much". D04 mentions during his playthrough that "the annoying amount of cutscenes" makes it feel like he "is watching a movie that is interrupted every few minutes to fight for a short while". D05 mentions that "you play one minute, then you watch 20 minutes of videos". The criticism on the ratio between "playtime" and time spent watching cutscenes was stated by participants to further be aggravated by the perceived low quality of the story told through them. D05 mentioned that he felt the "videos are long", but "without content". D07 mentions this explicitly, exclaiming that "the non-existent story makes the cutscenes only worse".

The cutscenes are used in the game to present dialogue between characters and to advance the story. Criticism on the cutscenes is directly related to the German participants overall criticism regarding Kingdom Hearts III's story. D01 mentioned during his play through that "whoever wrote this story has no idea how to write a story". D03 calls the plot "crude" while D08 describes it as "absurd". D05 surmises his experience of the story in the following way.

> **D05_KH3:** *Also, Fazit ist, dass die Storyline ist nicht sehr angenehm, oder sie ist überhaupt nicht erhalten. Ich verstehe nicht wer ich bin, was ich machen muss und es ist einfach sehr sehr chaotisch.*
>
> So, the conclusion is that the story is not really pleasant. Or more like not there at all. I don't understand who I am, what I am supposed to do, and it is just very chaotic.

Such feelings of confusion were expressed by the participants that had played the prior games in the franchise (D01, D04, D07) as well. The negative evaluation of the story is arguably caused by the overall negative impression of the game's characters and their interactions, especially the dialogue. D07 and D08 frequently criticized the characters and their dialogue as

"incredibly cheesy" or "silly". D04 mentioned that the dialogues in the game are "over-the-top and melodramatic", while D03 sees them as "pompous rambling" that "really annoys me". For the participants D03, D04, D05 and D08, such criticism was directly linked towards the inclusion of Disney characters in the game, which they felt did not incorporate well into the overall "anime aesthetic" (D01, D02) of the game. D02 brings this to a point, arguing that "this mix of Disney characters and anime characters is just awkward". During one of the first cut scenes in the game, D04 mentions in regard to the Disney character Yen Sid, that "I don't know who that sorcerer is, what the Disney characters are doing here and what my character is supposed to do". D04 goes into further detail on his feelings in concern to the incorporation of Disney elements.

> **D04_KH3:** *Dieser Wechsel zwischen den enorm hellen leuchtenden Welten, mit den Disneyfiguren, die da sehr gut reinpassen würden, und dann den relativ dunklen Orten und Charakteren, wie der World of Darkness, das fühlt sich so an als hätte man ein ernstes Spiel genommen und dann das Spiel mit den Disneycharakteren und es dann zusammengewürfelt. Und es passt einfach nicht zusammen finde ich! Jedenfalls nicht in der Form in der es im Moment umgesetzt ist.*
>
> This change between very bright, shining worlds with Disney figures that fir right in there and then the relatively dark places and characters, like the World of Darkness, that feels to me like one has taken a serious game and a game with Disney characters and then mixed it all together. And it just doesn't fit, I think. At least not in the form it is implemented in.

D05 repeatedly mentions that the inclusion of Disney characters is perhaps directed at children, as "children like Disney". D06 appears more positive on the inclusion of Disney characters. While he first mentions that he doesn't "know how to feel about" the "mix of anime characters and Disney characters", he later mentions that he likes "how they include humor in the game". After about 90 minutes into the game he mentions that "by now I really like all those Disney references, it's fun". D09 who is a fan of the franchise finds it "interesting, how the Disney characters and anime characters come together", mentioning that "they somehow don't really fit, but somehow they just do".

German participants also frequently questioned the logic of scenes within the game. The first stages of the game are set in the world of Disney's Hercules, where the town of Thebes is

attacked by Hades. D01, D03, D04, D06, D07 and D08 frequently commented on perceived inconsistencies between this setting and the actions of the characters within cutscenes. For example, after the player character arrives in Thebes, he is greeted by Hercules. D01, D03, D04 and D07 mentioned how the characters were talking leisurely with Hercules while the city around them is attacked and burns. D03 puts it like that: "Yeah sure, lets do some small talk, while around us the city burns down!". D07 exclaims that "while the city burns, let's just stop and talk for a while." Comments on such perceived inconsistencies were common during the play sessions of the German participants and appeared to further contribute towards the overall negative impressions of the game's characters. D01, D02 and D03 also criticized aspects of the game from the point of gender. D03 lamented the lack of playable female characters in her play session, while D02 and D03 criticized the depiction of the female characters in the game as simply being "damsels in distress" and found it "strange" that male NPCs in the game are more likely to talk to the player than female NPCs.

The game's combat system was also strongly criticized by most of the German participants for various reasons. First, participants felt that the controls in the game were comparatively "unresponsive" (D01) and during combat "unwieldy" (D04). D01, D04 and D07 mentioned that the controls appear to "be the controls of the first game" (D04) that was released in 2002. D01 calls the combat system "completely outdated". Second, combat in Kingdom Hearts III was criticized by participants for "largely consisting of repeatedly pressing a single button on the controller" (D07). During combat in Kingdom Hearts III, various special attacks and combination attacks with other members of the player's party are possible. These were described to look "very flashy" (D01, D03), but to not feel satisfying at all, as the participants (except for D09) did not understand how they were triggered and felt that they largely appeared at random, after repeatedly pressing the attack button. D06 found that there were too many mechanisms in the game that the player is meant to remember but which do not really matter to the game overall. The utterances by D03 and D04 below are an example of such sentiments.

> **D03_KH3:** *Das hat mir nichts gegeben. Keine Ahnung was passiert... ich drück einfach nur einen Knopf... wow Ok... ich hatte jetzt keine Sekunde das Gefühl, dass ich Herr des Kampfes war.*

That did not give me anything. No idea what happened here… I'm just pressing a single button… wow… Ok… Not for a second, I felt like I was in control of the battle here.
D04_KH3: *Das heißt es gibt jetzt also noch mehr Dinge, die hier auftauchen, wenn ich einen Knopf drücke. Ja, hier ein sehr schönes Beispiel. Es sieht vielleicht hübsch aus, aber ich drücke erneut nur X. Das ist wirklich eher störend, wenn das auftaucht.* That means, that more things just appear here when I push a button. Yes, this is a nice example. It may look nice but again I am just pressing X. It is rather annoying when it appears.

This criticism is also related towards participants' mentions of combat "being too easy" and feeling "repetitive" (D01, D03, D07, D08). Like in his criticism towards Ni no Kuni II, D08 again frequently mentioned that he found the colors during combat "too bright" and the screen "overloaded". This was mirrored by D01, D02, D05 and D07, who found the game "too colorful" and the special attacks "too flashy". D02 in her interviews described this as a "sensory overload", with "too much going on in the screen". D07 referred to this as "too much movements, too many enemies at once, too many lights and effects". The special attacks in the game were also mentioned to be "too exaggerated" (D07, D08), and hard to understand (D04, D05).

The "sensory overload" described by D02 appears as a salient topic among the German participants. In general, the graphics of Kingdom Hearts III were met with comparatively little criticism. D09, who had played the game before argued that the quality of the graphics vary greatly across the game, ranging from "some of the best graphics on the PS4 to some that look like they were done for the PS2". All German participants positively commented on the graphic within the initial intro sequence of the game, D08, who was critical of the game from the start, described it for example as "really beautiful". D03 for example mentions that "at least the graphics in the game are good". However, D01 and D02 also argued that they felt the graphics were sometimes "clunky" or "rough".

Criticism on the visual aspects of the game mainly focused on two dimensions both of which are related to the topics discussed above: the overloaded screen, that is the "sensory overload" as experienced by D02 and frequently mentioned by the other participants; and the character design. D03 felt that the Disney characters were not suited for a 3D presentation and argued

that they should have “either stuck to 3D anime characters” or “used a 2D art style”. The presentation of the Disney characters was also criticized by D02, who felt that they “looked different than in the movies”. D03 and D06 mentioned the “overly big feet” of the game’s original (human) characters, which D06 mentioned to “not at all fit with the rest of the body”. The game’s soundtrack was generally simply mentioned to be “beautiful” or “good” by the participants. Only D03 and D06 mentioned at two points in the game that the music was “too heroic” (D03) or “a bit annoying” (D06) as they thought it did not fit in with the current game state.

Overall, Kingdom Hearts III was the game most frequently negatively commented upon by the German participants, except for D09, a fan of the franchise. Criticism was levied at narrative elements, the game’s mechanics but also towards its visual style. Participants that had played the prior games in the franchise (D01, D04, D07) displayed similar criticism to those for which this was their first exposure to the series. A common thread in this criticism is that players argued that they did not feel “in control” of the game. Such feelings were apparently generated through the high frequency of cutscenes and corresponding comparatively short time of actively playing the game, and by the perceived lack of control in the combat sequences. D03 and D07 illustrated this point during the same scene in the game. While fighting a boss battle, they had to evade falling rocks to reach their opponent. This was seen by D03, D04, D05, D07 and D08 as one of the best scenes in the game, as it provided a change from the “repetitive gameplay up to this point” (D07). However, the sequence in which the player controls the avatar and evades rocks is in the end replaced by a cutscene, in which the character is shown to traverse the remining distance to the opponent. D03 and D07 both mentioned that this felt like the achievement of reaching the opponent was taken away from them as they did not directly control it.

Japanese participants

The Japanese participants were comparatively less openly negative about Kingdom Hearts II during their play sessions, although they again largely mention the same points as the German participants. Among the Japanese participants, only J03 had played the game before, although other participants had heard about the franchise and J06 and J11 had played some of the prior games. The Japanese participants frequently voiced the same problem of being unable to follow the overall story of the game, as they had no comprehensive knowledge of the prior entries into the franchise. For J02, this prevented her completely from enjoying the story as she “had no

idea who the characters are and what I was supposed to do". J06 felt that the game should be more accommodating towards first time players of the series.

Aside from this general complaint about the story's accessibility, other criticism by the German players appears less frequent among the Japanese participants. J08 for example feels that the story "was better than in Ni No Kuni II" and that the game was directed at people that enjoy the narrative elements of a game. J11 felt that the story was interesting, especially with knowledge about the prior games. Like the German participants, at least J02 and J07 picked up on perceived inconsistencies in the game's narrative, in the same scenes to which the German participants reacted as well. J07 reacts to a scene in which a female NPC is threatened by flames. Hercules, stating that "running is not fast enough", asks the player characters to stand on a statue, which he then goes on to throw in the apparent direction of the female NPC. J02 reacts to a scene in which again, a female NPC asks to be rescued. This NPC stands on a high pillar that is surrounded by enemies.

J07_KH3: *(笑)そんなことしてる暇ない。効率悪くないか？これ(笑)はよせいや。□もうぶつかったらどうするつもりなんですかね(笑)ムービーがやっぱ長いなぁ。これ助かったのか？これ最悪衝突死してませんかね？これ。* □(Laugh) You don't have the time to do this. Isn't this very inefficient? (laugh) Hurry up. What will he do if this hits her? (laugh). The videos really are long. So they saved her? Worst case is she would have died in the collision.
J02_KH3: *この女の子めっちゃギリシャ神話っぽい服と...頭のやつとか。お姉さん結構ぴ...ピンチの割にヘラクレス来ないの？って言ってる余裕があんのがちょっと面白い。* That girl is really like from a Greek myth, her clothes and… That thing on her head. It is interesting, that even though she is in quite a pinch, she has enough leisure to call out "isn't Hercules coming?".

The frequent criticism of the characters and their dialogue, as well as on the mix of Disney and "anime" characters was largely absent among the Japanese participants, with most of the participants calling the Disney character's design "cute", without mentioning their behavior or conversations. J03 for instance mentioned that she found the behavior and mannerisms of the

game's characters "cute", a stark contrast towards the way the German participants described them. Only J06 and J07 diverged from this and both mainly focused on the visual aspects of the characters' design. J06 describes some problems he felt with the overall artistic design of the game, that he felt resulted from mixing two different art styles.

> **J06_KH3:** *て、僕、結構前から思っていることなんですけど、キングダムハーツはなんかこうディズニーのキャラクターのグラフィックと、グラフィックというかデザインとこう人型のキャラクターのデザイン結構差があるなーと思います。服装とかは世界観統一されているんですけどー。まああえて分けているのかもしれないんですけど結構その差が気になっていこう。人型のデザインを結構とがったデザインというかトゲトゲしたデザインで、角があるデザインかなーとですけど、まあディズニーのキャラクターは昔ながら、ディズニーのなんか丸っこいような、って思っててー、そこの差は結構気になるところではあります。*
>
> I've been thinking this for a while now, but I think in Kingdom Hearts there is quite a difference between the graphic of the Disney characters and the graphic, or rather the design, of the human characters. The clothes and worlds and so on are unified but still… Well maybe they differentiated there on purpose, but it still bothers me. The human characters have a more sharp, spiky design, a design with edges, but the Disney characters have the same, well round, design as always. This difference really bothers me.

J07 wondered during his play session, whether Disney was not able "to do something like this on its own", that is create a game in which only Disney characters are included, as he felt that the "Square Enix characters are not needed".

In concern to Kingdom Hearts III's mechanics, the Japanese participants focused on similar points as the German participants in their utterances during the play sessions. The Japanese participants as well commonly mentioned the high frequency and long duration of cutscenes. J11, who generally evaluated the game's story positively, mentioned that he would have preferred it if they "made a movie instead of a game" as he felt that it wasn't really "necessary

to hold the controller for most of the playtime". The other Japanese participants argue similarly. However, while criticism among the German participants was also directed towards the content of the cutscenes, criticism by the Japanese participants was generally more directed solely at their frequency and length, aside from mentions that the participant's did not know some of the characters that appeared during the cutscenes. Like the German participants, the Japanese participants mentioned that they "want to play more" instead of simply watching cutscenes (J01).

Some differences in how the game's combat system was experienced by the German and Japanese participants were observed. J08 evaluates the game's combat system similarly to the German participants, arguing that it is possible "to win, just by continuously pushing the button", and that "more than the fun of combat, [the game] is more about the story". Interestingly, J06 also mentions the "straightforward" controls:

> **J06_KH3:** *一時間半ほど遊んでるんですけどー、これは結構端的に遊べるゲームなのかなぁと、思いました。ゲーム要素もそんな多くなくて、割とそうですねボタン押しているだけ進めるというかそういう直感的に遊べるゲームのかなぁと思います。*
>
> I have been playing now for an hour and a half. I think this is a game that can be played in a pretty straightforward way. There are not that many game elements and it seems like a game that can be played intuitively, just by pushing a button.

J03 perceives this "simplicity of control" as a positive factor, stating that "it's great that I can defeat them one after another just by pressing the button. I can advance quickly". J11 voices similar thoughts, stating that it "is possible to advance quickly just by pressing the buttons, and while this will probably become more complicated later in the game, I like it". J02 also mentions that the "action in the game is really fun". The special attacks that were framed as being "too flashy" and "overexaggerated" by some of the German participants were generally not negatively framed by the Japanese players. One of the main points of critique among the German participants is therefore evaluated rather differently by some of the Japanese participants. J01 and J10 however mentioned a different problem during their play session, that seems closely related to the camera work and graphical representation of combat in the game.

Both reported that feelings of nausea during the play sessions claiming that they were experiencing "gamen-yoi", that is a feeling similar to motion sickness[28].

As displayed in the comments above, the Japanese participants reacted more in genera showed less criticism on the visual design of the game. Aside from J06's mention of the "mismatch" between the Disney characters and human-like characters in the game, the Japanese participants tended to simply refer to the characters as "cute" without providing more insights into how their visual design was experienced. J01 and J03 thought that the game had the best graphics of the four games they were asked to play in the TAP sessions. J09 claimed that the "cute Disney characters" and "beautiful graphics" were the "best thing about the game". Again, the Japanese participants more frequently mentioned the voice acting in the game. One of the first impressions of J02 during her play session was "the nice voice" of one of the characters in the intro video. J01 praised several of the voice actors, while J04 repeatedly wondered who the voice actors for some of the characters in the game were, as he claimed to "have heard them before". J07 named several of the voice actors in the game.

4.2.4 Tales of Berseria

German Participants

Tales of Berseria is the newest entry into the long running Tales of series of Japanese RPGs. The game combines an anime aesthetic with an active combat system. The story is set upon a premise of betrayal and revenge centered on the female protagonist Velvet. The game is markedly darker in tone than Ni no Kuni II or Kingdom Hearts III. Overall, this appears to have been appreciated by the German players as they remarked more positively on the game's story and plot when compared to the previous two games. Before beginning to play, D03 described her expectations of the game as it being "a normally good JRPG with turn-based combat system many high moments and a sufficient story".

D01 appears skeptical in the beginning of the game, as he thinks that "revenge stories have been used too often" and "can go badly" or "quickly become a cliché". During his play session, he makes however increasingly positive remarks about the game's narrative. After about one 40 minutes he mentions that the story is "well done". After 90 minutes, he mentions that the story is already "far more complex than the story in Kingdom Hearts" and feels "very interested

[28] A popular belief within the games industry is that Japanese players are more likely to develop game induced motion sickness (Carlson and Corliss 2011, 6).

in how this plays out". The other participants react similarly positive. D02 finds the story "very interesting" while D03 argues that it is "good, solidly executed" and wants "to know how things develop later on". D04 refers to the story as "very good". D05, D06, D08 positively evaluated the "darker atmosphere" of the game, with D08 arguing that the story was "superficial, but far less so than in [Ni no Kuni II or Kingdom Hearts III]". D07 states the he likes the story, as it is "mature and dark in tone, but also quite deep in some places". D09 seems to hold the most positive opinion as he mentions that:

> **D09_ToB:** Die *Geschichte ist auf jeden Fall super interessant und super originell, von alldem was ich bis jetzt so gespielt hab. Ähm... wobei das schon wahrscheinlich in die Richtung geht, dass eigentlich die Guten die Bösen sind und so weiter. Und die Bösen, die Dämonen, sind eigentlich die Guten. Dennoch, ich finde einfach so wie die Geschichte aufgebaut worden ist, finde ich das klasse.*
>
> The story is definitely very interesting and very original, compared to everything I have played so far. Although… it probably goes in the direction that the good guys are actually bad and so on. And the bad guys, the demons, are actually the good guy. Still, how the story was constructed here, I think that is great.

As in Kingdom Hearts III, D05 and D08 expressed annoyance with the frequency of cutscenes in the game, as they "take too long" (D05) or are "boring" (D08). The other participants were however less critical about this. D04 explicitly stated that he felt the cutscenes in the game to be "less of an interruption" than in Kingdom Hearts III, as they "introduce the world well". Criticism on the game's narrative elements among the German players were mainly focused on two aspects of the game, the interactions between the main character Velvet and her bedridden little brother and the characters that join the player's party after the introduction phase of the game. The relationship between Velvet and her little brother is depicted as loving and very close. The murder of her brother is what provides the protagonist with her goal of revenge and drives her forward throughout the story. D03, D05, D07 and D08 openly criticize their interactions. D03 thought they were "too long", as "it is already clear how much you love each other and that you are a great family". D05 believed that large parts of their conversation were "unnecessary", while D08 refers to their conversations as "very cheesy". D06 reacted in a comparatively neutral way, simply stating that "oh, these too love each other a lot". D07 provides a more detailed account of his experience:

D07_ToB: *Naja, also dieses Gespräch ist schon ein bisschen schwer zu ertragen. Die beiden hier. Ich merke ja, dass sie sich gernhaben und ich weiß, dass das so ein bisschen wohl jetzt den Kontrast zu später stärken soll... aber ja... das ist schon ein bisschen viel Gesülze von den beiden. Viel zu süß.*

Well, that conversation is a bit hard to bear. These two here. I realize that they love each other, and I know that this is probably supposed to heighten the contrast to later on… but yes… that is a lot of drivel. Far too sweet.

During the two and a half hours of their play sessions, all participants encountered two characters that later go on to join the player's party. The German participants generally reacted negatively towards these characters, especially the character Magilou. D03 and D04 found her "very annoying" since their first encounter with her, with D04 exclaiming that he "cannot understand why they included her". D04 later argues that both characters "do not fit into the serious tone of the story". This criticism of the party members stands in contrast to the overall positive reactions towards the main character Velvet. D02 and D03 found it positive that they were able to play as a female protagonist. Both also positively commented upon the way Velvet was characterized. D05 and D06 also specifically commented positively on her personality and the perceived depth of her character. Her change from the kind and warmhearted person presented in the game's intro towards a colder, revenge driven personality was positively remarked upon by D08 and D07 found her "cool" and "believable".

One aspect that all German participants remarked upon was the way Velvet is dressed in the game, and how female characters in general are portrayed in it. D05 for example wonders why "women in manga or manga are always so lightly clad". D08 thinks that the game is "quite sexistic" with the female characters "being all dressed in hot pants or miniskirts". D02 argued in her post play interview that the way the main character was dressed and "oversexualized" coupled with the game's third-person perspective, that is the player sees the game world from behind the protagonist, that forced her to "continuously have her in my view" prevented her from really enjoying the game. All German participants noticed and commented upon the portrayal of women. D04 wondered about the protagonists age and saw that as "a potential problem", D08 found her "too well-proportioned for a 16-year-old girl". Several participants also mentioned the behavior of characters in the intro sequence of the game. Here the protagonist Velvet, who lives with her younger brother and her widowed brother in-law appears to be completely in charge of the housework for her family. D08 puts this as "the woman looks

like a model and cooks for the men". D01 criticizes this at length as an "outdated way of thinking". D06 remarks upon the "very traditional views presented here", while D03 makes fun of it. D01 and D04 also wonder whether "such a way of thinking is still common in Japan".

The mechanics and systems of the game were less frequently mentioned by the German participants. Utterances mainly focused on the depth and difficulty of the combat system. D01 found that it was "overloaded with too many systems" that make it hard to understand. D02 had some problems with the combat system, that prevented here from continuing the game after a certain point. The remaining participants generally remarked upon the complexity of the system that once can "really bury yourself" in (D03). D03 and D04 remarked upon the potential for longtime motivation that the complexity of the combat system provides. D04, D05, D06 and D07 also mentioned that they felt the system left it up to the player how much time he wishes to invest. D07 found that positive, as he mentions that he was able to advance and enjoy the game without delving too deeply into the combat mechanics. D01, D05, D06 and D09 remarked negatively on the running speed of the protagonist, which they felt was too slow.

The utterances made on the audio-visual elements of the game are largely consistent among the German participants. The game's graphics were argued to appear "outdated" (D01, D03, D04, D05, D08). D01 felt they were "on the level of a PS3 game". D09 wondered about the game's framerate. These negative comments on the overall quality of the game's graphics are however contrasted by the participant's positive comments regarding the "high attention to details" (D03, D07) evident in the game's world. D08, who generally was the most critical about the artistic design of the games in the TAP sessions, professed to like the design of the initial areas in the game. D05 notices details like the movement of gras in the wind. The pre-rendered animated cut scenes within the game were evaluated positively by the German participants except for D08 who "disliked the anime design". The game's soundtrack received mixed responses by the participants, being variously called "too stereotypical" (D01), "not bad" (D02), "trashy" (D03), "pleasant" (D04) or "silly" (D08).

Japanese Participants

Like the German participants, most of the Japanese participants evaluated Tales of Berseria generally positively. Three of them professed that it was the game they enjoyed the most out of the four games they played in the TAP session. J03 had played the game before, while J10 and J11 had played previous games in the Tales of series.

The Japanese participants less frequently mentioned the game's narrative elements that the German participants. J06 surmises that:

> **J06_ToB:** *でストーリーは結構僕は結構好きで...世界観も作り込まれてるし、あんまり結構他のゲームにない世界観かなあっていう感じですね。うーん、まあだけどこの今までやった3つのゲームの中でいうと1番...特殊で面白かったかなあとは思います。*
>
> I really like the story. There is a lot of world building and I think that the atmosphere is quite unique when compared to other games. Among the three games I have played here until now, I think it is the most unique and fun.

J08 similarly praises the story and characters of the game:

> **J08_ToB:** *ストーリーはそうですね、なんか、すごい作り込まれている印象がありました。でまた、途中に、そのアニメ映像みたいなが差し込まれてて、なんていうんですかね。なんかこのストーリー今後どう展開していくのかなーって、ちょっと気になりました。あと、キャラクター、その主人公のその様々なキャラクターがなんか、それぞれのストーリーを持っているような感じを演出したような感じだったんでなんか、そのいろんな情報が詰まった、いろんなストーリーが詰まったゲームだなって感じました。ま、あと、結構楽しいですね、やってて。ま、あまり、RPG をやったことがない自分でも、すごい楽しめましたっていうのは、多分その、理由としてはそのストーリーが面白くて、ストーリーすごい作り込まれてて、その次の展開がどうなるんだろうっていうワクワク感がありましたね。*
>
> The story is… yes… I got the impression it was very carefully crafted. And in between there are these anime scenes incorporated. How should I put this? I somehow feel interested in how the story will develop from now. The characters, the protagonist and other characters, they all have their own story, and they are acting

based on it, so I felt like this was a game in which a lot of information and various stories are included. And it was very fun to play. Even for someone like me, who hasn't played an RPG before I was able to have a lot of fun. The reason for this is probably that the story is interesting, very well crafted and you get excited about how things will develop next.

J09 found that the game's story "can be enjoyed by men and women", while J10 mentioned that this was "after a long time, finally a Tales game with an interesting story again". J03 "liked the characters and story" and was "very interested" in the conversations between the characters. The criticism of the German participants regarding some of the game's characters was not directly mirrored by the Japanese participants. The closest to such sentiments was voiced by J07, who felt that the "protagonist is so strong" that he wondered "do I really need the other characters?". The strongest negative sentiments on the story were expressed by J01 and J02 who disliked the change of the main character from "a very kind person to this dark personality" (J02) and found the game overall "too dark" (J01). The interactions between the protagonist and her brother criticized by German participants, were not negatively commented upon by the Japanese participants. Instead, the scenes between the siblings were referred to as "cute" (J01, J02, J03) or not specifically remarked upon at all.

Interestingly, the age of the game's protagonist differs between the German and the Japanese version of the game. In the German version, Velvet is 16 in the intro sequence of the game, and 21 during the main game. In the Japanese version, she is 15 and 20 respectively. Unlike the German participants, most of the Japanese participants did not directly question the portrayal of female characters in the game or the age of the main character. J07 is an exception, as he commented upon the way the character is dressed in the game, claiming that the protagonist "shows a high degree of exhibitionism" and wonders about the age rating of the game. J01 and J10 also mentioned the protagonist's clothes during the game, J01 simply wondering whether "she isn't cold", while J10 finds the clothes "lame".

The game's mechanics, especially the combat system, was also predominantly evaluated positively by the Japanese participants. J08 and J09 mention that the combat system was easy enough for beginners to understand and did not create any barriers for the enjoyment of the game. J11 found the combat "simple" but positively compared it to Kingdom Hearts III's combat system. J02 did not discuss the combat system at depth but frequently engaged in battle during the game and mentioned the desire to "fight more". J06 on the other hand frequently

mentioned that he wanted to “avoid combat as much as possible” as he felt the systems were too complicated. J07 mentioned that he felt the combat system was complex and provided the player with various possibilities. J10 enjoyed the “various RPG elements in the game”, mentioning the ability to collect items and talk with NPCs.

The Japanese participants’ reactions to the audio-visual elements of the game were mixed. The criticism by German participants who evaluated the graphics as “outdated” were not observed to the same extent in the Japanese reviews. J07 does however mention, that he found that the game was inferior to Kingdom Hearts III in this regard. J01 disliked the “muted colors” in the game. J08 mentioned that “the game is not really a graphical game” but stated that the graphics are “on the good side” and “better than in Ni no Kuni II and at about the same level as in Kingdom Hearts III”. The inclusion of anime cutscenes and the overall “anime-like look” (J06) were also mentioned by the participants. J02 mentioned that she would have found it more consistent with the overall style of the game, if the prerendered cutscenes were held in in-game graphics as well. J02 and J03 liked the “anime style” of the characters. J07 disliked the “anime-like presentation”, while J08 mentioned that the animated sequence made it easier to immerse himself in the game world. J10 found the game’s anime scenes “beautiful”. The games soundtrack was again not commented much upon. J08 mentioned that the background music during combat felt “very motivating”. Aside from this, again Japanese participants appeared to pay more attention to the character’s voices in the game.

4.2.5 Dragon’s Dogma: Dark Arisen

German Participants

Dragon’s Dogma was the game most positively evaluated by the German participants but also the game in which differences between the participants appeared most salient. D01, D05, D06, D07 and D08 professed to have liked the game the most out of the four games in the TAP session, while D04 only placed it second because he felt that “it was less unique than Tales of Berseria”. D09 on the other hand liked it least of all games in the sample.

Dragon’s Dogma shows some stark differences when compared to the other games chosen for the TAP sessions. Originally it was published for the PlayStation 3 in 2012. The PS4 game played by the participants is a remastered version of the original. It has a more photorealistic graphic style and features an open world in which the player is comparatively free to act. The game’s story is less linear, and its presentation largely depends on how the player decides to

proceed within the game. Unlike the other games, the player character can freely be generated by the player and their personality is not predetermined.

The participants' reactions towards the game's narrative elements are greatly influenced by this. While the participants were generally able to grasp the general premise and narrative structure, of the other games in the TAP sessions within the limited time they were playing, this was not possible for Dragon's Dogma. The utterances of the participants in concern to the narrative elements therefore tend to focus more on the overall atmosphere of the game and specific events within it. D07 had played the game's PlayStation 3 version before.

The game begins in medias res. The player is thrust into a sequence of fights with a premade character, without explanation of the game's narrative. D03 felt that this was "a bit much for the beginning" as she had not yet grasped the game's mechanics. D04 and D05 mentioned on the contrary that the "controls are easy to understand" (D04) and "intuitive" (D05). D06, D07, D08 and D09 made frequent positive comments on the game's "dark atmosphere" (D07, D08) describing it as "cool" (D06) or "epic" (D09). After the tutorial sequence, a cinematic sequence is shown, that was positively commented upon by all participants, as looking "cool" (D01) or "epic" (D08). Next, the players create their own player character, for which they are freely able to adjust the name, sex, voice and appearance. D03 and D06 remarked upon the default setting for the character's weight and height, which they perceived as "unrealistic".

During the next sequence, the eponymous dragon of the game attacks the fishing village in which the player character lives. The dragon rips out the player character's heart and consumes it. The player character however lives on, apparently connected to the dragon. The German participants reacted strongly towards this scene. D03 and D05 questioned the logic of the character still being able to move without his heart. D07 was reminded of the film Dragonheart (Cohen 1996), that features a similar scenario. D06 and D08 found the scene "awesome" and D09 described it as "super interesting".

After this sequence, the players are largely free to explore the game world as they see fit. The narrative elements of the game were afterwards not mentioned often by the German participants. D01 mentioned that the does not "care about the story at all", while D03 argues that "this is not a game with a story focus". D04 describes his impression of the story and characters in the game in the following way:

D04_DD: *Also beim letzten Spiel hatte ich ja zum Beispiel kommentiert, dass die Charaktere mitunter einfach nur nervig sind. Zumindest wenn sie zu häufig vorkommen und viel zu sagen haben. Aber bei diesem Spiel haben die Charaktere bisher zumindest beinahe keine Eigenschaften. Auch von der Story habe ich bisher relativ wenig gesehen, das liegt aber vermutlich daran, dass ich nur relativ kurz heute spielen kann und dass die eigentliche Story dieses Spiels sehr lang ist. Insbesondere wenn man noch die ganzen Grinds und sowas mit einbezieht um überhaupt die Nebenquests erledigen zu können.*

So, for the last game I mentioned that the characters could be extremely annoying. At least when they appear frequently and have a lot to say. But in this game, until now, the characters have no characteristics at all. I also saw only relatively little of the game's story, but this is likely because I can only play for a short while today and the actual story is probably very long. Especially if you take into account the necessary grind to succeed in the side quests.

The overall evaluation of the game was accordingly heavily based on the game's mechanics. These were strongly positively described by D01, D04, D05, D06, D07 and D08 and more negatively by D02, D03 and D09. The main focus of the positive comments on the game's mechanics was the combat system. D01 initially claimed in the early stages of the game, that he felt it was too restrictive. However, this gradually started to change, after the first 20 minutes in his play session. During the first battles in the game, he perceived the combat system to be "clunky" and "not fun enough". This shifted into a very positive impression of the combat system and general gameplay. After 30 minutes in the game, he perceived the combat system to be "really good, but somehow ridiculous". After one hour, he exclaimed that "the gameplay is awesome" and "incredibly fun". D04, D05, D06 and D07 frequently positively mention the game's combat system, especially the mechanics to grab opponents or climb on larger enemies. The game's "Pawn" system of up to three computer controlled NPCs that support the player in combat and show a high degree of autonomy was also mentioned favorably, although D08 felt that they were too effective in combat, so that "I didn't really need to do anything".

D02 exhibited some trouble with the combat system, finding it too difficult. This prevented her from exploring areas besides those around the starting village. D03 mentioned that the combat system "wasn't bad, but it's nothing that motivates me to continue playing". D09 stated that "fighting in the game is fun", he however also expressed that "two and a half hours are not

enough to get used to it". German players generally emphasized that their impressions of the game's systems are limited by the time restrictions of the play session. The game's open world design was appreciated by D04, D05, D06, D07 and D08, who claimed to "enjoy the higher degree of freedom" (D05, D06) when compared to the other games in the sample and that they felt "less restricted" (D07).

The audio-visual elements of Dragon's Dogma received very mixed responses by the German participants. D01 and D09 mention the outdated graphics of the game. While for example D08 notices this as well but argues that "the realistic graphics are definitely far better than the anime graphics". D04, D05, D06 and D07 profess towards a similar preference. D06 mentioned that the game's music was not as good as in the other games. D01 makes varying statements towards the music's quality during his play session, while the other participants did not react much towards the music except for praising it as "good" at some points in the game.

The German participants mentioned that Dragon's Dogma felt more "familiar" to them than the other games in the sample. D04, D05 and D08 for example mentioned that this is "closer to the Western games" they usually play. D07 argues that the game is a "typical" open world game:

> **D07_DD:** *Ja, das ist halt das typische Open World Design. Ich finde es schön hier einfach mal auf eigene Faust erkunden zu können. Ist natürlich etwas schwierig, wenn man nicht so viel Zeit hat. Aber gut, man ist hier auf jeden Fall nicht so eingeschränkt wie in den anderen Spielen. Das gefällt mir persönlich mittlerweile viel mehr. Ich habe zwar Final Fantasy und so... so lineare Spiele geliebt, aber mittlerweile... ja... Seit Morrowind oder so finde ich dann die Open World doch attraktiver.*
>
> Well, it is the typical open world design. I really like it, to be able to just explore on my own here. Of course, it is difficult when the time is limited. But still I am definitely less restricted than in the other games. Personally, I prefer this. I mean, Final Fantasy… and other linear games like that, I loved them… but by now… yeah since Morrowind or so, I do think that an open world is more attractive.

D04 picks up on this point of "typicalness" in his summary of the game and in the post-play interview, arguing that he enjoyed the game very much but it also felt like various other RPGs

he had played before and did not show any of the unique characteristics that he had noticed in the other games during the TAP sessions.

> **D04_DD:** *Das führt allerdings dazu, dass das bisher so ein bisschen an ein MMORPG erinnert, in dem Sinne als das Story und Charaktere eigentlich eher nur im Hintergrund existieren und in der Hauptsache das Questing steht, weil eben mit typischen Sammelmissionen, Eskortmissionen und hier und da mal einer Dungeon und so weiter und so fort, das ist dann zwar sehr viel einfacher für einen westlichen Spieler nachzuvollziehen und man kann damit im Zweifelsfall sogar deutlich mehr anfangen. Es bleibt aber dabei, dass dadurch ein bisschen das Einmalige von diesen japanischen Spielen abhandenkommt. […] Das hätte auch genauso gut von vielen, vielen anderen Spieleentwicklern stammen können und zeichnet sich jetzt nicht in irgendeiner Art und Form als ein japanisches RPG aus.*
>
> But this leads to the game feeling a bit like an MMORPG, in the sense that the characters and story only exist in the background and the main part of the game is the questing, with typical collect missions, escort missions and the occasional dungeon and so forth. This is far easier for the Western player to follow, and they will more likely know what to do with it, but in the end, the uniqueness of Japanese games becomes a bit lost. This […] game could have been made by many other developers and does in no way look like a Japanese RPG.

Japanese Participants

The opinions of the Japanese participant on Dragon's Dogma were strongly divided. Four of the Japanese participants stated that this was their favorite among the four games in the TAP sessions. On the other hand, for five participants it was the game they enjoyed the least. Overall, this leads to a more negative evaluation when compared to the reception by the German participants.

Like the German players, the structure of the game made it hard for the Japanese participants to evaluate the narrative elements of the game. J01 thought the setting was "scary but very cool". J02 enjoyed the game's "overall atmosphere". Some of the participants expressed discomfort with the game's characters, especially the computer-controlled NPCs that can join the player's party, the "pawns". J03 for example mentions that:

J03_DD: *あとキャラデザがねえ、やっぱりねえ、色々いじれて面白かった。でもなんだろ、うーん…個人的にはその、ポーンの、喋り方まで全部変えられるっていうのがなんだかすごい気持ち悪くて…キャラメイク、性格までキャラメイクできるのは嫌だなあってちょっと思ってしまった次第…まあ、なんか、なんだろ…自由としてはすごい高いのはわかるんだけど…仕様としてあんま好きじゃねえなあっていう気はする。*

Well and the character design, well, it was interesting to be able to play around with it. But, how should I say that, well… Personally, it felt really bad to be able to change everything about them, including the way they talk. I didn't like how it is possible to change things up to their personality in the character generator. Well, how should I put this… It is a very high degree of freedom, but I felt like I don't really like it as an option.

J08 touches upon this point, when critizizing the lack of characterization of the NPCs:

J08_DD: *でー、なんかま、先ほども言ったんですけど、キャラクターが、一般人みたいな、ちょっと僕はあんまりわからないんですけれども、普通のキャラクターっぽくないっていうのがあって、人によっては、なんか、そのゲームの世界観うまく入りきれない人もいるのかなって思ったりもしますっていうのは、あります。*

Well, and I mentioned that earlier, but the characters they are not like normal people. I don't really know, but they are not like normal characters and depending on the person, I think that some people might not be able to really immerse themselves in the world because of that.

The game's combat was again received in different ways by the Japanese participants. J11 claimed to have enjoyed the greater freedom in the various options provided by the game's combat system, although he claims that the game's "AI ranges from very good to very bad". J03 liked the "effects of magic" and mentioned that the combat "felt good". J01, J02 and liked that they were able to play immediately, without having to concentrate on the story and

mentioned that combat was “fun”. For J07, J09 and J10 the game was “too difficult”. J09 and J10 referred here to the game’s combat system but also to the overall design of the game, as the “did not know how I was supposed to proceed” (J09). J10 referred to the game as “difficult, not only combat wise, but also from the overall worldview”. J08 described the combat system in the following way:

> **J08_DD:** *あとーその戦いシーンがこのー、そのー、すごいおっきいモンスターとの戦いのシーンでなんていうんですかね、迫力が他のゲームと比べて少ない、その攻撃もなんか、例えばキングダムハーツと比べてなんかいろんな、技とかがあるんですけれども先ほども言ったように、地味な攻撃が多い。技とかもなくて、もう単純に、つっついたり、剣をかざしたり、本当にリアルな攻撃、なんですよね。だからなんか、そういうのが好きな人は、このゲーム向いてるかもしれないなって思って、ただ、僕的にはどっちかっていうとーこういうなんか地道でリアリティのあるゲームよりかはちょっと非現実的なアニメっぽい、なんか、迫力のある方がちょっと楽しいかなって思いました。*
>
> Well, the battle scene is like, well you fight against very big monsters and, how to say this, there is less impact when compared to the other games. These attacks as well, for example compared to Kingdom Hearts, there are many skills, but like I said before, they are very plain. There aren’t really any techniques, it is just simply thrusting or holding your sword, very realistic attacks. This is why I think that people who, well, like this sort of thing might like this game. Personally however, I have more fun with unrealistic anime-like games with more impact, than with more steady, realistic games.

This preference for “unrealistic” graphics was observed for other Japanese participants as well and is completely absent among the German participants. J03 for example mentioned in her post-play interview that she felt the design of the game was “too realistic” and that she preferred anime graphics, as they make it easier to “distance herself” from the events in the game. She referred to Dragon’s Dogma as “scary”. While J01 evaluated the realistic graphics of the game

generally positive, she also frequently used the word “scary” during scenes in the game. J04 professed that he enjoyed the game least of all games in the TAP sessions, and that the “too realistic” look was at least partially the reason for this. Aside from such discussions, the Japanese participants generally evaluated the game’s audio-visual elements similar to the German participants. J07 for example referred to them as “outdated” especially in concern to the animation of the game’s characters and J08 mentioned that “they were nothing special”. J02 however referred to the more realistic design of the game as “beautiful”.

4.2.6 Summary

Thematically, the participants’ utterances during the TAP, as well as during their post-play interviews were predominantly directly related to each game’s narrative elements, mechanics or its audio-visual representation. The resulting TAPs differ from user reviews in that they enable insights into the momentary PX of the participants. While user reviews generally depict the reviewers overall experience of a game, in the form of remembered and episodic PX, the TAPs make it possible to examine how players experience specific scenes and mechanics and potentially how their impressions change over time. D01 for example initially was highly critical of the game Dragon’s Dogma but gradually started to enjoy the game’s combat, and eventually evaluated the game positively overall.

Across the four games that the participants were asked to play for the TAP sessions, differences and similarities between the German and Japanese participants were observed. Table 14 depicts the stated order of preference of the four played games in the TAP session per participant[29]. In total, twelve different patterns are evident, hinting at the influence of individual preferences in the evaluation of games. The evaluation of the games Kingdom Hearts III and Dragon’s Dogma differ greatly between the German and Japanese participants. Among the nine German participants, five clearly stated that they enjoyed the game Dragon’s Dogma the most. D04 professed to only have chosen Tales of Berseria over Dragon’s Dogma as his favorite game, as it was “more unique”. At the same time, seven of nine German participants enjoyed Kingdom Hearts III the least out of the selected games. The preferences of the Japanese participants result in different patterns. Four of the Japanese participants stated that they enjoyed the game Dragon’s Dogma the most, while five professed to have liked it the least. The evaluation of

[29] After their last play sessions, participants were asked to put the games in order of their preference, based on their overall enjoyment of the games. J05 was excluded as she was unable to complete her play session of the games Tales of Berseria and Dragon’s Dogma because of the 2020 outbreak of the Covid-19 virus.

Kingdom Hearts III appears more varied, with five of the Japanese participants placing it first or second, and five placing it third or last.

Table 14 Overview of the German and Japanese participants' stated order of preference of the four games played in the TAP sessions, after all games were played. 1 designates the strongest preference, i.e. the game the participant enjoyed the most, and 4 the weakest. J05 is excluded from this table (see Footnote 24)

		Preference			
	ID	1	2	3	4
German Participants	D01	DD	ToB	NK2	KH3
	D02	NK2	ToB	DD	KH3
	D03	NK2	ToB	DD	KH3
	D04	ToB	DD	NK2	KH3
	D05	DD	ToB	NK2	KH3
	D06	DD	NK2	ToB	KH3
	D07	DD	ToB	NK2	KH3
	D08	DD	ToB	KH3	NK2
	D09	KH3	ToB	NK2	DD
Japanese Participants	J01	DD	NK2	ToB	KH3
	J02	DD	KH3	NK2	ToB
	J03	KH3	ToB	NK2	DD
	J04	NK2	ToB	KH3	DD
	J06	DD	ToB	NK2	KH3
	J07	KH3	NK2	ToB	DD
	J08	ToB	KH3	NK2	DD
	J09	ToB	NK2	KH3	DD
	J10	ToB	NK2	DD	KH3
	J11	DD	KH3	NK2	ToB

The differences in the experience of these two games are evident in the participants' utterances on them and were often elaborated on in their summaries of the respective game and in their post-play interviews (see Appendix E-1). The participant's stated reasons for a positive overall evaluation (placing it first or second) and a negative evaluation (placing it third or last) touch upon the same four aspects of the game. (1) The quality of its graphics, (2) the degree of freedom of the game, (3) its combat system and (4) its realistic presentation.

The quality of the game's graphics here refers solely to the technical aspects, such as framerates or quality and resolution of textures. The game's high degree of freedom is framed in two different ways by the participants, either positively, as it allows players to play as they wish, with fewer restrictions, or negatively as it poses a barrier towards the game's accessibility because of the lack of structure to guide the player through the game. Combat system refers to the game's combat in general. Realistic presentation refers to the overall presentation of the

game, partially its art design, aiming at a photo-realistic visual representation, but also the game's mechanics, as the actions of the player character and the NPCs are more closely modeled after what is physically possible in the non-virtual world.

The participant's reasons for their positive or negative evaluation of Kingdom Hearts III differ slightly from this. Aside from the quality of the graphics, the game's overall art style, that is the artistic design of the game, was frequently mentioned by the participants. Furthermore, the game's narrative elements usually appeared to be part of the participants' evaluations. Comments on the game's narrative elements were either focused on the accessibility of the overall story of the game and franchise, or on the concrete narrative elements in the game, particularly the characters behavior and dialogue.

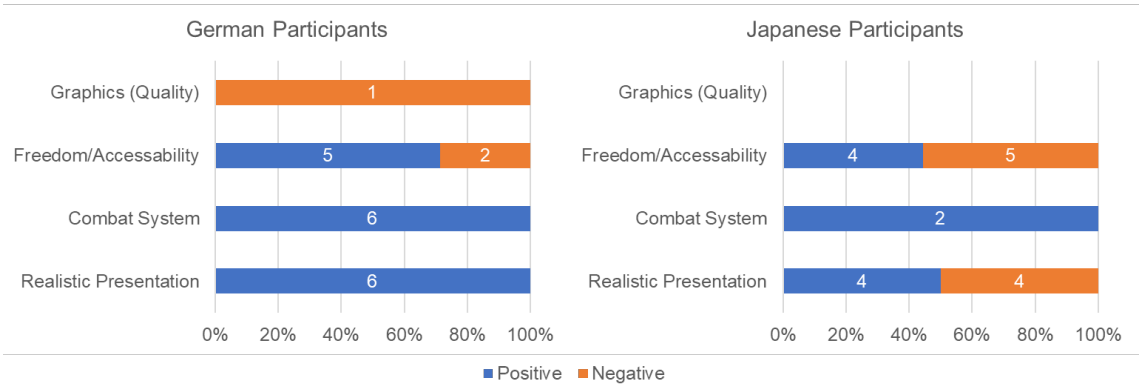

Figure 54 Frequency of German (n=9) and Japanese (n=10) participants' stated reasons for evaluating Dragon's Dogma positively or negatively

As depicted in Figure 54, German and Japanese participants that evaluate Dragon's Dogma positively mention the greater realism of the game, especially in its graphical presentation, its combat system and its comparatively high degree of freedom. Participants that negatively evaluated the game also mentioned the freedom of the game, but generally linked it towards problems of accessibility, that is a feeling of not knowing what they "are supposed to do" or how to progress in the game. This was usually accompanied by a stated preference for more a more linear narrative. Japanese participants that disliked Dragon's Dogma frequently cited the realistic graphic and overall design of the game as one negative point, claiming that they prefer a more abstract visual design.

As shown in Figure 55, the German participants' negative impressions of Kingdom Hearts III are linked towards negative utterances on the game's art style, it's combat system that was argued to be not rewarding enough, repetitive and confusing, as well as on the narrative elements in the game. Criticism on the game's narrative was observed regarding the overall

accessibility of the story, that is participants found it hard to follow as they lacked knowledge on the prior games in the series, but also in concern to the behavior of the characters in the world and their dialogue. On the other hand, the Japanese participants that were critical of the game did not mention the game's artistic design negatively. Furthermore, while they shared in the criticism of the narrative's accessibility, they did not necessarily negatively mention the narrative elements present in the game itself. Lastly, while Kingdom Hearts III's combat system was largely negatively received by the German participants, more Japanese participants reacted positively towards it. J01 and J10's feelings of motion sickness were however not mirrored by German participants.

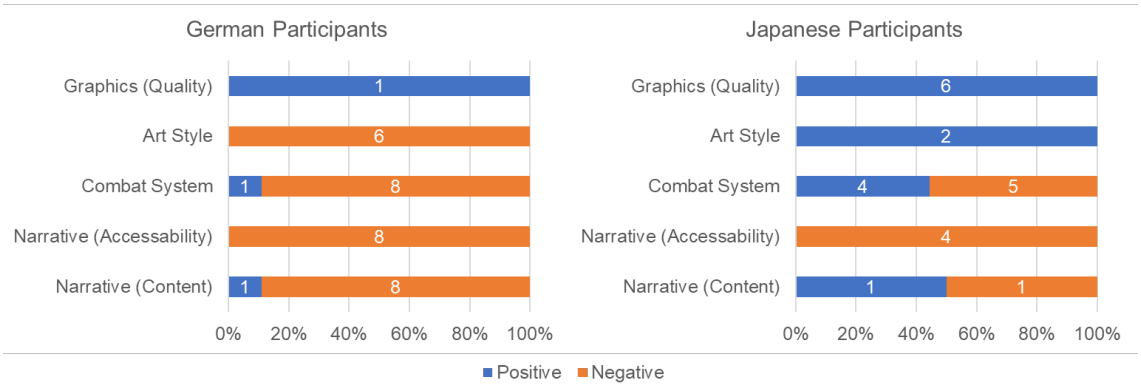

Figure 55 Frequency of German (n=9) and Japanese (N=10) participants' stated reasons for evaluating Kingdom Hearts III positively or negatively

To lesser degree, the differences portrayed above are also evident in the TAPs of Ni no Kuni II and Tales of Berseria. Overall, the German participants evaluated Tales of Berseria more favorably than the Japanese participants, with eight of nine participants placing it either first (D04) or second in their order of preference. The German participants also tended to evaluate Tales of Berseria more favorably than Ni no Kuni II, as six of nine participants evaluated it higher in their order of preference. The participants' stated reasons for this were mainly the darker "more mature" atmosphere of the game when compared to the light-hearted setting of Ni no Kuni II. Among the Japanese participants, a clear preference for the darker setting of Tales of Berseria was not observed. Several German participants also criticized Ni no Kuni II's design as "too cute" or "cheesy", while such criticism was absent among the Japanese participants.

Table 15 summarizes the overall tendencies of preferences and characteristics, evident in German and Japanese participants utterances. "Overall tendencies" refers here to the most common patterns among the German and Japanese participants respectively. The overall

positive reception of the game Dragon's Dogma, and to a lesser degree Tales of Berseria, among German participants highlights their preferences for a darker, less sentimental setting and non-linear storytelling practices. German participants reacted negatively towards conversations between characters in Tales of Berseria and Kingdom Hearts III that they felt were too sentimental. German participants also frequently criticized or at least mentioned the way female characters are portrayed in the games, which appears to conflict with societal values that the participants internalized. The majority of Japanese participants preferred the more linear way that the game's narrative is presented in Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria over the non-linear presentation in Dragon's Dogma. Overall, criticism on the behavior and conversation of characters in-game ware not observed, although some Japanese participants criticized the Pawn system in Dragon's Dogma as they claimed that they preferred premade characters with a set personality instead of creating their own NPCs.

Table 15 Tendency of preferences and characteristics among the German and Japanese participants

	German Participants	**Japanese Participants**
Narrative	Non-linear storytelling, less sentimental, confirmation of values	Linear storytelling, sentimental
Mechanics	High aversion to repetitiveness	Low aversion to repetitiveness
Audio-Visual	Photo-realistic graphics, clear depiction of violence, realistic female characters, clear UI	Abstract graphics, abstract depiction of violence, *kawaii* aesthetic, colorful UI
Technological	High expectations	Low expectations
Structural	High degree of freedom	Structures that direct play

German participants showed a high aversion towards repetitiveness in combat. This is particularly evident in the responses to Kingdom Hearts III's combat system which was strongly criticized for consisting predominantly of "button mashing". Such critique was largely absent among the Japanese participants. Two of the Japanese participants however described feelings of nausea, that they attributed towards the game's combat system.

The majority of the German participants clearly preferred the photo-realistic graphic style of Dragon's Dogma. The abstract graphic style of the other games was instead frequently criticized. German participants overall also professed to prefer a realistic depiction of violence, including the depiction of blood, and a less colorful and clearly organized user interface. Japanese participants, although strongly divided on this point, overall appear to prefer a more

abstract visual style. Several Japanese participants criticized the realistic visual design of Dragon's Dogma, which no German participant did and explicitly stated that they prefer a more "anime-like" visual style. Japanese participants also did not generally react negatively towards the design of the games' characters, while several German participants described the design of Ni no Kuni II or Kingdom Hearts III as "too cute" or "childish" and criticized the design of female characters in Tales of Berseria as oversexualized. The Japanese participants also did not negatively remark upon the colorful UI of Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria, instead criticizing the "dark look" of Dragon's Dogma, that "lacks impact".

During the play sessions, German participants exhibited higher expectations towards the game's technological aspects than the Japanese participants. This was indicated by frequent critical examinations of the games' framerates, the quality of textures, the movement of characters and their facial expressions. German participants also mentioned the games' loading times, which was only mentioned by J07 and J11 among the Japanese participants. At least tangentially related to this point is the criticism of German participants regarding the only partial dub of the game Ni no Kuni II, which was noticed by all German participants but not explicitly mentioned by the Japanese participants.

Lastly, German participants overall indicated that they enjoyed the high degree of freedom, provided by Dragon's Dogma and felt too restricted in the other games they played in the TAP sessions. This is strongly related to the preference towards non-linear storytelling. Several Japanese participants on the other hand professed that the high degree of freedom in Dragon's Dogma made it difficult for them to understand how to progress in the game. They stated a preference towards clear structures and goal in the game that direct the player, which again closely relates towards a preference for more linear storytelling practices.

However, these patterns of preference are not universal among the German and Japanese participants. Among the German participants D02 and D03 for example prefer the games Ni no Kuni II and Tales of Berseria over Dragon's Dogma, while D09 enjoyed Dragon's Dogma the least out of the four games, for largely similar reasons than the Japanese players (see Appendix E-1). On the other hand, J01, J02, J06 and J11 preferred the game Dragon's Dogma over the other games, largely for the same reasons as the German participants. Some salient differences do however remain. For example, none of the Japanese participants negatively commented upon the art style of Ni no Kuni II. While several German participants evaluated the game as "too cute" or "cheesy", Japanese participants only positively remarked upon them

as being “cute”. On the other hand, several Japanese participants disliked the realistic style of Dragon’s Dogma, this opinion was not at all present among the German participants. Such differences are also evident in concern to narrative elements, such as the German participants’ discomfort about the conversations between the game’s main character and her brother in Tales of Berseria, which was not mirrored by the Japanese participants.

Some patterns of game preferences appear to be more frequent among the German than the Japanese participants and vice versa. German participants overall appeared more positive towards the game Dragon’s Dogma, that follows Western principles of game design. Japanese participants displayed a more positive impression of the game Kingdom Hearts III than the German participants. Among Japanese participants, the reception of the game Dragon’s Dogma appears strongly divided, out of the ten Japanese participants that completed all games, four placed it first, while five placed it last. This indicates the importance of individual preferences and meso-level sub-cultural identities towards the overall experience of games. Nevertheless, as described above, differences that appear largely constant between the German and Japanese participants are apparent for various elements of the games they played during the play sessions.

5 Discussion

5.1 User Reviews, Think-Aloud Protocols and Player Experience

The results of the analysis of user reviews and TAPs complement each other. While the user reviews provide a high number of comprehensive reports on German and Japanese reviewers' overall experience of the selected games, the TAPs make it possible to examine players' momentary experience of the selected games over time and to question participants directly. The user reviews, especially for games that are not part of the commercial mainstream in a region, allow for insights into the meso-level player cultures surrounding them, while user reviews on games that are more commercially successful, and reviewed by a more diverse player base, allow for an examination that is arguably closer to the macro-level of regional culture. Resident Evil 7 is for example commercially successful and part of the general mainstream in Germany and Japan, differences on this game are therefore to a degree indicative of macro-level differences between German and Japanese players. On the other hand, ToCS is played by a narrow group of German players, with its exceedingly positive German reception being at least partially attributable towards the strong representation of meso-level Japanophile and JPRG fan sub-cultures in the user reviews. Persona 5, for example, due to its high critical acclaim lies somewhere in between with a strong influence of meso-level game cultures but a strong representation of first-time players of the franchise (cf. Brückner et al. 2019).

Across the user reviews and TAPs, similarities and differences between German and Japanese players interacting with the selected games are evident across all ontological elements of a game, as well as in regard to the games' contexts. As the analysis of user reviews and TAPs has shown, German and Japanese players largely focus on the same topics with a similar frequency when reviewing or playing a game. These topics directly correspond to the game model, outlined by Schell (2008), although they go beyond a game immanent ontology as players also make frequent references towards external or contextual factors that influence their experience of playing.

German and Japanese players of the selected games most frequently referenced the games' mechanics, followed by narrative elements, the aesthetic audio-visual elements and, least frequently, the technological dimension of games. The focus on the game's mechanics is not entirely conform with Schell's game model. Although his argument that the technological elements of a game are the farthest removed from the player is congruent with these results,

the higher apparent focus on gameplay elements above narrative or audio-visual elements, which he poses as closest to the player, present at least a potential contradiction.

Two divergent tendencies between the results of the analysis of user reviews and the results of the analysis of TAPs stand out. First, in the TAPs, the German participants made more frequent, and often more critical, statements on the narrative elements of the selected games than the Japanese participants. This cannot be observed in the user reviews, neither overall, nor for the games played in the TAP sessions, where a contrary tendency was observed. Second, the German TAP participants' negative reactions towards the game Kingdom Hearts III stands in strong contrast to the overall positive evaluation of the game in the German user reviews. These two points are interrelated.

Although a broad range of players appear to be represented within the user reviews, the apparent breath of opinions differs between games. As described in the previous chapter, the games Kingdom Hearts III or ToCS are evaluated significantly more positively by German than by Japanese reviewers. At the same time however, the overall amount of reviews and their share of total reviews is lower in the German, than in the Japanese document set (see Figure 18). This hints at a narrower group of people reviewing the games. The positive evaluations of Kingdom Hearts III or ToCS can at least partially be attributed towards a comparatively small cohesive group of players, usually fans of the franchise or genre, that are more likely to write a review on the game. One distinct benefit of the TAP sessions is the inclusion of participants that do not necessarily belong to such fan groups. D09's evaluation of Kingdom Hearts III, which most closely correlates to the opinions expressed in the user reviews on the game, points towards this, as he is also a longtime fan of the franchise. The TAP sessions therefore also serve as a method of triangulation for the results of the analysis of user reviews, that make it possible to differentiate between the influence of meso-level and macro-level cultural factors.

The higher frequency of utterances on narrative elements by the German TAP participants is potentially related towards cultural barriers experienced by the participants as their mentions of narrative elements were most frequently in the negative context of questioning the logic of the respective narrative. These influence of the evaluation of narrative elements on the overall evaluation of a game appear however low, as the German participants were more focused upon ludic and visual elements when summarizing the games. As such, this dimension of the momentary player experience, while evident in the TAPs, is not evident in the user reviews that predominantly reflect episodic and remembered PX. Japanese players on the other hand

place a higher importance on story elements in their overall evaluation of a game, evident in the user reviews.

Table 16 Overview of consistent tendencies of differences between German and Japanese players across the analysis of user reviews and TAPs

Category	Differences
Meta/Context	Preconceptions and opinions about Japanese games; Different frames of reference; Differences in evaluation
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics	Different aversions to repetitiveness; Linear vs. open world
Story/Narrative	Linear vs non-linear storytelling; Differences in values; Focus on characters vs. focus on overall story
Audio-Visual	Realistic vs. abstract visual design; Focus on characters vs. focus on game world; Experience of UI
Technology	Different expectations

Overall, the results of the analysis of user reviews and TAPs are however largely consistent. This indicates their significance and robustness. This confirms the existence of differences in the way German and Japanese players experience and evaluate games. For example, German players aversion to repetitiveness, or Japanese players sometimes critical attitude towards photo-realistic visual design hold true in both analyses. Different experiences in concern to specific narrative or visual cues, as well as German player's ostensive overall higher expectations towards a game's technological level were also observed in the user reviews and TAPs alike. Table 16 summarizes the most salient differences between the German and Japanese players in the user reviews and TAPs including the thematic category they are located in.

The differences across the various categories are however interlinked. For example the tendency of Japanese reviewers and participants to prefer linear storytelling is closely related to their preference for overall more linear game design, with clear goals and easy to understand progress. The differing expectations in concern to a game's technological aspects are intricately linked to the differing frames of reference, i.e. different prior experiences within the scope of the reviewer's or participant's media context. While it is analytically useful to differentiate between the differing elements to which players correspond in their reports of their player experience, these elements are strongly interrelated (cf. Brückner et al. 2020). This is particularly evident in the TAPs. D02's negative reception of the "oversexualized" female

protagonist of Tales of Berseria was for example heightened by the game's third-person perspective. J08's opinion of the game Dragon's Dogma being "too real" is not only directed at the game's visual design, but also at the combat mechanics and other systems. D01's impression of the game Dragon's Dogma appeared highly negative in the beginning, but as he began to enjoy the game's combat system, he also began to more positively comment on other aspects of the game, such as the visual design.

Players experience games holistically. They are able to, and in their evaluations usually do, differentiate between the different ontological elements of games. Their experiences are however directly shaped by the way these elements relate to each other, interact and come together. One epistemological challenge this thesis faces is that its dataset is limited to players' self-reported experiences of play (see Figure 56). The user reviews and TAPs are the result of cognitive processes that filter and structure what players articulate about the games they play. They are imperfect and abstract, but direct, reflections of the actual PX. Partially, the differences between the actual content of the TAPs, reflecting the players' momentary experiences and the summaries they provided at the end of each game reflect this process. The summaries were generally concise and touched upon most of the points players mentioned during their sessions, but participants did report more elaborately on some elements of the games than on others. This appears to partially correlate with their emotional response towards these elements, as aspects of the games that were negatively evaluated were discussed in more detail.

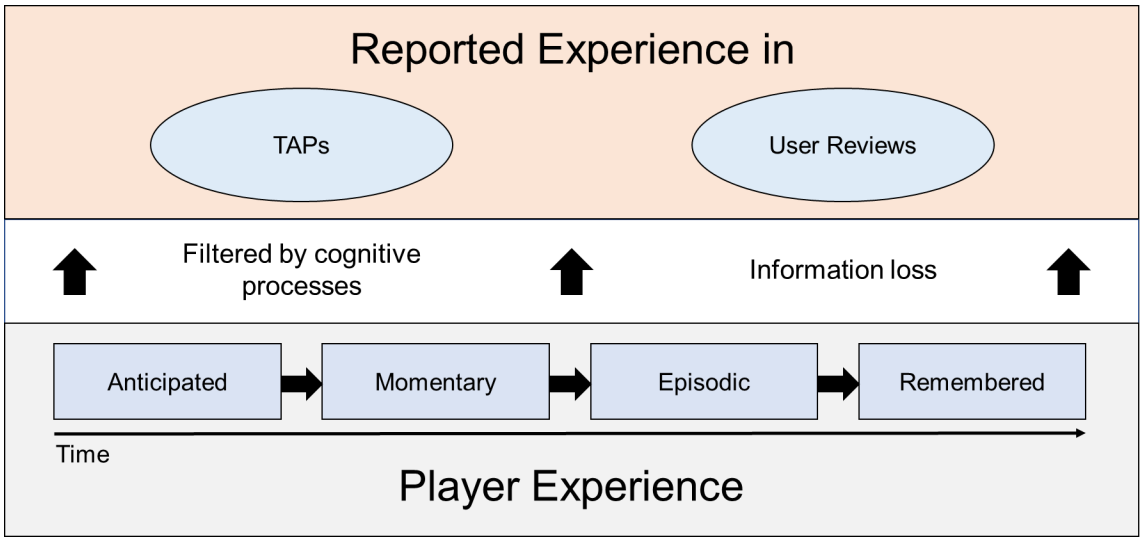

Figure 56 Process from actual player experience to reported experience

Aside from this, the user reviews, and summaries of the think aloud protocols are arguably influenced by the reviewers' and participants' prior experiences with game related media, that form their anticipated experience. User reviews for example often appear to be stylistically modeled after professional reviews. Some of the participants in the TAP sessions (D03, D07, D08) used rating systems from game magazines to rank the games in order of their preference. Game media have arguably shaped the way users experience, talk about, and evaluate games. The influence of game media in shaping the structure of user reviews and TAPs, that is how which elements of a game are discussed, does however not necessarily extend towards the concrete content of user reviews or TAPs. The opinions and evaluations of players often diverge from those expressed in games-related media, and user reviews tend to include a broader range of topics than professional reviews (cf. Brückner et al. 2019; see Section 3.4.1).

One factor that potentially influences the results of this study is the possible existence of differing cultures of reviewing or talking about games between German and Japanese players. The fundamental question this thesis aims to answer is whether and how players' experiences of digital games are shaped by and differ based on their cultural background. Culture would therefore shape the way players interact with and experience games (see Figure 57). To measure potential differences, this thesis is dependent on player's self-reports. The concrete structure and content of these self-reports are however potentially also influenced by similar or different cultural factors as those that shape PX. While no clear indications towards this have been found in the analysis of user reviews, some of the TAPs can be interpreted to indicate such differences. For example, Japanese participants more frequently describe characters or events in the games as "cute" ("kawaii") than the German participants. On the one hand, this appears to indicate differing aesthetic preferences. On the other hand, the terms "cute" and "kawaii" are not necessarily identical and their usage context tends to differ between German and Japanese participants (cf. Asano-Cavanagh 2014; Aizawa and Ohno 2010). Also, while Japanese players were more critical than German players in the user reviews, the opposite was true for the TAPs. This is potentially influenced by a different culture of (verbal) criticism in Germany and Japan. For a cross-cultural analysis of PX, it is thus necessary to keep in mind that players' experiences are shaped by their cultural background, but the (measurable) reports they produce and that reflect these experiences, are at the same time also the product of differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

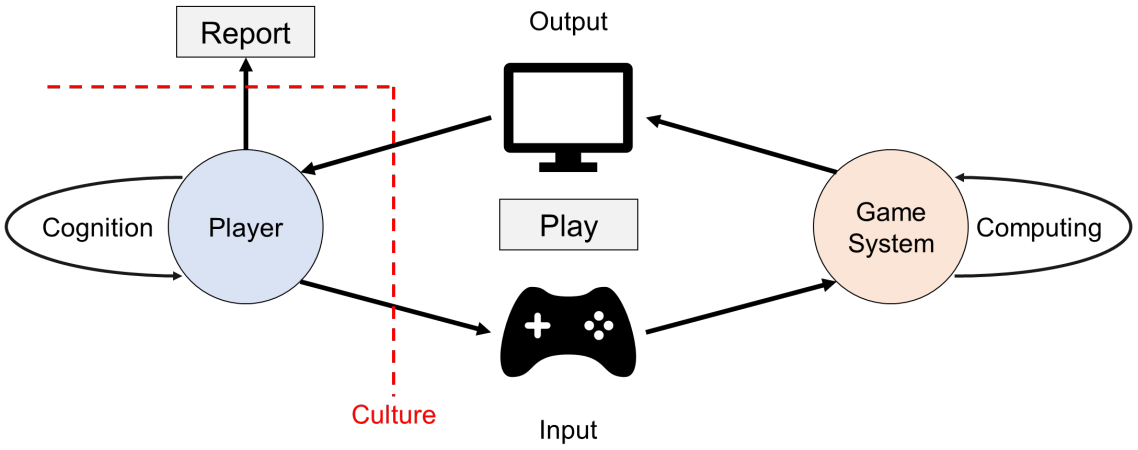

Figure 57 Overview of the relation between player-game interaction, reported experience and the possible influence of culture

Despite these considerations, the analysis of user reviews and think-aloud protocols does yield insights into a series of apparent differences in how German and Japanese players experience and report on games across all ontological aspects of a game and across different dimensions of Calleja's (2011, 2007) framework of player involvement in games (see Section 2.2). In their reports, players most frequently evaluate and present their experience on specific elements of a game. The results of the qualitative analysis are derived from these reports and therefore, at least on the abstract level of thematic categories, conform to the ontological models of games presented in Section 2.1. By employing Calleja's model of interrelated macro- and micro kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective and ludic involvement to reframe the results of the analysis, it is possible to make more direct inferences on how these results relate to players' experiences.

The dimensions of Calleja's involvement model do not directly correspond to the ontological elements of a game. This is a direct result from the above-mentioned fact that, while player's reports on their experiences are often structured in ways that largely conform to Schell's ontology, and players experiences are shaped by the affordances provided by a game, a player's individual PX itself is arguably the amalgamated result of their holistic interaction with these interrelated elements. However, some overlap is evident. For instance, the dimension of narrative involvement is closely tied to a game's story and narrative elements. The ludic involvement is related to a game's systems and mechanics. In lieu of the absence of other players in the game world in the selected games for this study, shared micro-involvement is closely related towards NPCs in the games. The spatial involvement corresponds to parts of what has been termed the *Structure* sub-category within this thesis, for example the level design

and the openness or linearity of the game world. Kinesthetic involvement is tied to the controls of a game and therefore corresponds to the corresponding *Controls* sub-category in this thesis. Calleja's affective involvement is also accounted for within this thesis, by corresponding sub-categories in the *Meta/Context* and *Story/Narrative* categories (see Table 17).

Table 17 Categories and sub-categories of the qualitative analysis that most directly correspond to Calleja's dimensions of player involvement

Dimension of Involvement	**Corresponding (Sub-)Categories**
Kinesthetic	*Controls*
Spatial	*Structure; World; Audio-Visual*
Shared	*Characters*
Narrative	*Story/Narrative*
Affective	*Experience Description; Emotionality*
Ludic	*Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*

Mapping the differences between German and Japanese participants uncovered in the empirical part of this thesis to this framework or player involvement, provides insights into which dimensions of PX are potentially more strongly influenced by players' cultural backgrounds. Before doing so, it is however useful to present these differences (see Table 16) in a more concise manner, by sorting them thematically instead of by (analytical) category. The following interrelated dimensions of differences were evident and consistent in the analysis of user reviews and TAPs.

- Differences of societal norms and values
- Different narrative preferences
- Differing expectations and frames of reference
- Different receptions of realism and abstraction
- Focus on characters vs. focus on world/story
- Freedom/openness vs. linearity
- Differing aversion to repetitiveness

Below, each of these dimensions of difference is briefly outlined.

Societal Norms and Values

Games are neither created nor located within a value free space (cf. Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014). Differing evaluations of specific narrative elements, in the dataset for this thesis most

saliently differing perceptions of gender roles, can be traced to differing internalized societal norms and values (cf. Lebra 2019) of the players. All German participants of the TAP session mentioned for example the visual depiction of Velvet, the main character of Tales of Berseria, and framed it as potentially problematic or upsetting, based on her "oversexualized" exterior and her behavior within her family at the beginning of the game, conforming to traditional female gender roles. The latter was not mentioned at all by the Japanese participants of the TAP, while only two directly reacted to Velvet's appearance, not necessarily critical. Differences in societal norms and values are a potential main source of differences in PX, especially in regard to a game's narrative or visual elements. Although gender roles in Japan (and Germany) are changing (e.g. Saito 2014), traditional gender roles are comparatively more common in Japan than Germany (Estévez-Abe 2013) and influence players problem awareness accordingly. A mismatch between the societal values depicted in a game and those internalized by the player can lead to negative experiences of a game's content.

Narrative Preferences

In general, German participants in the TAPs appeared to prefer darker, grittier narratives. The early plot of Tales of Berseria, a story where the main character's driving goal is to take revenge for the murder of her brother, was generally more positively evaluated by the German players than the more light-hearted narratives of the other games in the sample. German and Japanese participants and reviewers also reacted significantly different towards in-game dialogue in the selected games. This was visible in concern to humor[30], as for example the behavior and dialogue of characters in the game Kingdom Hearts III was perceived to be "funny" or "cute" by Japanese participants but criticized by German participants as "lame" or "absurd". Similarly, German participants in the TAP found the conversation between Velvet and her little brother in Tales of Berseria "too sentimental" and "hard to bear" while Japanese participants did not show any such response, again referring to it simply as cute. This shows a different perception of specific displays of sentiment, in this case the caring relationship between the two characters (Ihara and Nittono 2012). The content of conversations, especially when conveying emotions or humor, thus appear as another source of differences in the experience of narrative elements. While such differences were also observed in the user reviews, they appear less pronounced,

[30] For a broader account of Japanese humor and a comparative perspective, see Abe et al. (2006); Katayama (2008); and Wawro (2018).

again arguably through the different representation of meso-level player sub-cultures, that explicitly enjoy different forms of narratives and displays of sentimentality.

Notably, such differences, largely conditional upon in-game texts, are most directly influenced and potentially mitigated by localization practices (cf. Wawro 2018). Localization practices contribute to the stark differences between the German and Japanese reception of the games ToCS and ToCS2 in the user reviews (Brückner et al. 2019). In this case, by reshaping the dialogue in the games, partially in response to criticism directed at it by Japanese players made possible because of the post-gold localization model (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 234), and partially to adapt to the different target audience.

Expectations and Reference Frames

The experience and evaluation of games is closely related to a player's prior experiences. Players made frequent references and comparisons to other games or media in the user reviews and TAPs. The tendency of which concrete media is referenced differs between German and Japanese players. German players more frequently reference Western games and media, which are rarely or not at all referenced by Japanese players and vice versa. Some media, such as the Final Fantasy series or The Legend of Zelda games, are frequently referenced by both groups, indicating a shared canon of games. On the other hand, Western PC games or television series are referenced by Western players, but not by Japanese, while Japanese players mention Japanese games or related media content (Ōtsuka 2014; Steinberg 2012, 2019) that Western players do not. While some media appear to be part of a shared canon, that is utilized to evaluate games, others are largely unique to either of the two groups.

German players apparent higher expectations towards a game's technological aspects, or their surprise at the game Ni no Kuni II being not completely dubbed are arguably related to this, as German players more frequently compare them to high budget Western games with highly sophisticated audio-visual representations than Japanese players. Differing expectations, that can also be rephrased as differences in the anticipated PX, can influence all dimensions of the reported PX. German players preconceptions about some of the Japanese games for example, such as the anticipation of the "weird" evident in German user reviews on Yakuza 0, or participant D03 and D07's expectations of the game Tales of Berseria being a turn-based standard JRPG, despite its active combat system, showcase this.

Realistic and Abstract Representations

Japanese players make frequent mention of the "realness" of a game. For several Japanese participants in the TAP, the game Dragon's Dogma was "too real". As Juul (2011) argues, games are "half-real", constructs of real rules and fictional worlds. How strongly the rules and fiction in a game's virtual world mirror those of our own, or how abstract they are held, varies[31]. Tetris (Paschitnow 1984) for example is highly abstract. The game's goal is to align falling blocks in a 2D environment. ArmA 3 (Bohemia Interactive 2013), on the other hand, is a highly realistic military simulator utilizing a sophisticated physics engine that allow for a close representation of real world (physical) rules within the game space, photorealistic graphics and is set in the near future of our own world. Dragon's Dogma lies somewhere in between. The game is set in a fictional world with supernatural elements, such as magic. However, the game's graphics and various gameplay elements are designed to appear similar to the non-virtual world. This likeness of gameplay and aesthetic elements to the non-virtual world is what the Japanese participants criticized when they felt that the game was "too real".

There are two main sources for this criticism. J03 for example felt that the "realistic graphics and systems" in the game made a clear distinction between "reality and the game" harder. This impaired her ability to enjoy the game. The degree of realism in the game provided a barrier for her to enter and interact with the game world, or to use the metaphor discussed in Chapter 2, to enter the "magic circle". J04 and J08 also simply disliked the realistic graphics style and its depiction of violence. J08 for example felt that the realistic graphics were "too plain" and did not provide enough "impact". He preferred the colorful and dynamic design the other games. None of the German participants on the other hand made similar statements on the game being "too real". Instead, several participants found the other games in the sample "too flashy" or "too colorful". They interpreted this as being "childish" or "exaggerated". Combat in these games was similarly criticized. J08 for example frequently criticized the characters and mechanics in Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria as "unrealistic". Several German participants and reviewers in the user reviews found the games too colorful, with D02

[31] In his essay "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later", part of the collection "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon", American writer Philip K. Dick argues that "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." By following this line to its conclusion, one might argue that digital games are not half-real, but indeed just "real". "Real" or "realism" in this paragraph does however only refer to a higher degree of resemblance (i.e. a lower degree of abstraction) between rules and aesthetics in the game world to the rules and aesthetics in the virtual world.

describing it as leading to "a sensory overload". Most German participants argued that they prefer darker and grittier visual styles.

The preference towards realism in games differed greatly among the Japanese participants. In stark contrast to the experiences of J03 or J08 for example, J01 and J02 claimed to have enjoyed the game Dragon's Dogma the most, partially because of its graphical design. However, the point remains that while none of the German participants and none of the reviewers in the examined user reviews argue that a game in the sample is "too real", while this was frequently the case for the Japanese participants in the TAP and to a lesser degree the reviewers in the user reviews.

Most likely, this is the outcome of vastly different media ecologies and environments in which the German and Japanese players are located. Even Japanese players of digital games that are not normally active consumers of Anime, Manga, or other related cultural products, are arguably used to see abstract, highly stylized characters in their everyday media environments[32]. Despite the global popularity of Anime and Manga, German players media environments are usually not penetrated to the same degree by such content. Some Japanese players, such as J03 or J04, are arguably more used to stylized or abstract forms of visual representation and implementation of rules to a degree, that a too realistic presentation of the non-virtual (phenomenological) world in entertainment media provides barriers for their enjoyment. The high penetration of the Japanese media environment with abstract, stylized characters, forms part of the foundation by which Japanese players evaluate games, especially as games in Japan are often closely linked to other media such as Anime and Manga, as part of the "media mix" (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015; Ōtsuka 2014; Schules 2015; Steinberg 2012). The barrier of differing media environments can however be mitigated by players' active media selection, as was observed in several user reviews and participants in the TAPs (e.g. J02, D03, D09; also see Section 5.5).

Character-Centric and World-Centric

Across the TAP sessions and the user reviews, Japanese participants generally more frequently and at more detail mentioned the characters in the game, while German participants appear to focus more strongly on the game world. In the TAP sessions, German players made frequent

[32] Azuma (Azuma 2009, 2007) examines the question of realism in anime, manga and games from a postmodern viewpoint. For a summary and discussion of the Japanese debate on the relationship between animation and realism, especially in reference to the thoughts of Eiji Ōtsuka and Hiroki Azuma, see Steinberg (2014).

mentions of the topography, artistic design, and graphic quality of the game world. Japanese participants appeared more focused on the characters within the game than the world itself. Japanese participant's reactions to the world mostly amounted to short evaluations of the "world view" or "world setting" ("sekaikan") presented in the game, by which they appeared to refer to the overall artistic and narrative style of the game world (cf. Condry 2009). The focus on characters, is evident in the user reviews as well and extends to their aesthetic as well as narrative aspects. While German players tend to focus on the overall plot of a game, when discussing its narrative elements, Japanese players focus more on the characters within the game, their personalities, and personal narratives.

This difference does to some extent also seem to correspond towards contemporary practices in content creation within the Japanese pop culture industry, especially the anime industry, where character creation is seen as more important than creating the setting of a work (Condry 2013; Suzuki 2020). Some scholars have argued that the high popularity and consumption practices of characters in Japan are related to traditional religious practices and imagery (Occhi 2012).

Freedom and Linearity

The different receptions of freedom or linearity in the games are intricately linked towards discussions of the game world. In the TAP sessions, Japanese participants were more likely to criticize the open world design in the game Dragon's Dogma, as it provided difficulties in progressing efficiently through the game. While German participants experienced the same difficulties, albeit to varying degrees, they usually did not frame this as negative. German participants on the other hand did criticize the linear level design in Ni no Kuni II. Several German participants derogatively referred to them as "tube levels" ("Schlauchlevel").

The respective preferences for an open or more restricted level design also correlate with preferences towards open or linear storytelling. A majority of the Japanese participants argued that they would have preferred a more stringent, linear, and therefore more easily accessible narrative in the game. On the other hand, most German participants professed to have preferred the style of storytelling in Dragon's Dogma, over the linear style of the narrative being told across cutscenes in the games Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III or Tales of Berseria.

This tendency for Japanese players to prefer a more linear game design can partially be attributed towards historical path dependency. While many Western game developers are focused on creating open game worlds with "meaningful" choices for the player, Japanese

developers have been largely successful with more linear, story driven games (Kanerva 2015). In his model of culture, Hofstede (2011; 2010) attests Japan a high degree of "uncertainty avoidance". Within Japanese society, uncertainty is minimized through social institutions and practices. Perhaps this also influences players' game preferences, with Japanese players showing a tendency to prefer a clear structure within a game that they can follow.

Aversion to Repetitiveness

A last dimension of differences concerns the participants' and reviewers' reactions towards repetitiveness in the games. A tendency towards a higher aversion of repetition or repetitive tasks is indicated among the German participants and the German user reviews. This is evident in concern to different aspects of the games. Except for D09, the German participants generally disliked the combat system of Kingdom Hearts III as they argued that it simply consisted of continuously pushing one button (i.e. button mashing). Several German participants also criticized the repetitive design of enemies and the overall repetitive combat in Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III, Tales of Berseria and, to a lesser degree, Dragon's Dogma. German participants also frequently wondered whether the games would require "grinding", that is the performance of repetitive tasks to gain (necessary) advantages and progress in the game, usually by receiving experience points to "level up". Such mentions were largely absent among the Japanese participants in the TAPs and comparatively less frequent in the Japanese document set of user reviews, than in the German document set. German reviewers for example frequently made mentions on the repetitive quest design of several games in the sample, which appears comparatively less often in the Japanese reviews. At least superficially, this correlates with Hall's (1989) and Hofstede's (2011; 2010) observation that high-context cultures such as Japan are more process-oriented, while low-context cultures like Germany are more result-oriented (see Section 5.4).

In Table 18 the uncovered dimensions of difference are cross-referenced with the thematic categories they were observed in and the corresponding dimensions of Calleja's player involvement model. The table does not differentiate between involvement on the macro- or micro-level. Differences in expectations and reference frames which could be rephrased as anticipatory PX or the influence of anticipatory PX on (reported) momentary, episodic, or remembered PX, are however closely related to the macro-dimension of player[33] involvement

[33] Strictly speaking, macro involvement with a game also appears possible for non-players of games. The casual consumer of YouTube let's plays or esports spectators are arguably involved with games on the macro-level,

with games. Affective involvement, that is the emotional engagement with the game, is potentially relevant or influenced by all dimensions of observed difference. The table is not necessarily exhaustive, as it reflects the concrete results of the empirical analysis of this thesis. While the comparatively high attention of Japanese players towards the characters of a game seems, within the dataset of this study, largely limited towards their narrative, shared and affective involvement, differences stemming from this dimension could potentially also influence the ludic involvement of players, that is the concrete decisions they make within the game, for example by favoring one character over the other.

Table 18 The dimensions of difference uncovered in the empirical analysis, with the thematic categories in which they were observed and the corresponding dimensions of Calleja's model of player involvement

Dimension of Difference	Observed in Category	Dimension of Involvement
Societal Norms and Values	*Story/Narrative; Audio-Visual*	Narrative; Affective; Shared
Narrative Preferences	*Story/Narrative; Meta/Context*	Narrative; Affective; Shared
Expectations and Reference Frames	*Meta/Context; Technology*	Kinesthetic; Spatial; Ludic; Affective
Realistic and Abstract Representation	*Audio-Visual; Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics; Meta/Context; Story/Narrative*	Spatial; Ludic; Affective; Narrative
Character-Centric and World-Centric	*Story/Narrative; Audio-Visual*	Narrative; Shared; Affective
Freedom and Linearity	*Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics; Story/Narrative*	Narrative; Spatial; Ludic; Affective
Aversion to Repetitiveness	*Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics*	Ludic; Kinesthetic; Affective

Overall, the analysis of user reviews and TAPs has shown they are rich and complimentary sources on players' experiences in concern to games. They allow for insights into various levels of player-game interaction, across all levels of Calleja's framework and in concern to all

without actually playing them. Such a differentiation is however not directly relevant to the arguments in this thesis.

ontological elements of a game, despite the inherent memory biases. Particularly, the methodological approach outlined and used in this thesis, that combines the analysis of user reviews and TAPs allows for a comprehensive examination of PX across cultural borders. It is also easily scalable, as it is possible to flexibly include more games in the sample or reduce the number of TAPs if necessary, based on cost- and time restraints. The dictionary created for this analysis can also be adopted for other languages and can be flexibly adjusted in regard to the concepts and terms employed.

5.2 Differences, Similarities and Interacting Levels of Player and Game Culture

Linking the observed differences to the concept of the magic circle outlined in section 2.2 has the potential to provide insights into the relationship between players' experiences and behavior in real and virtual worlds. German players real-world values influenced their experience of some of the selected games negatively, as the values displayed in the game world (i.e. within the magic circle) did not match their internalized norms. However, this does not necessarily mean that Japanese players' values differ fundamentally from those of German players. Another possible explanation lies in a difference in what players expect and demand from their entry into the magic circle. In other words, how similar or different to the real world they want the game world to be.

Japanese players tend to prefer an abstract graphical representation and are less averse towards (arguably hyperbolical) displays of emotions between in-game characters. They also show a tendency towards preferring linear game design, with a clear structure and goals to follow. Put differently, what they expect of a game differs strongly from what they experience in the real world and their real-world values appear less influential on their experience. On the other hand, German players' preferences for a photo-realistic graphic and open world design can be interpreted as an overall expectation for the game world to mirror the real world. They also expect a match between their norms and values and what is depicted in the game. Within the metaphor of the magic circle, the membrane between the real and virtual game world appears less solid for German than for Japanese players (see Figure 58). Put differently, Japanese players differentiate more strongly between game world and real world and are therefore less critical of, for example, oversexualized content. The abstract graphical presentation can be interpreted as a cue that makes the separation between game and real world easier. Something that can arguably also be observed in broader Japanese pop culture, such as anime and manga.

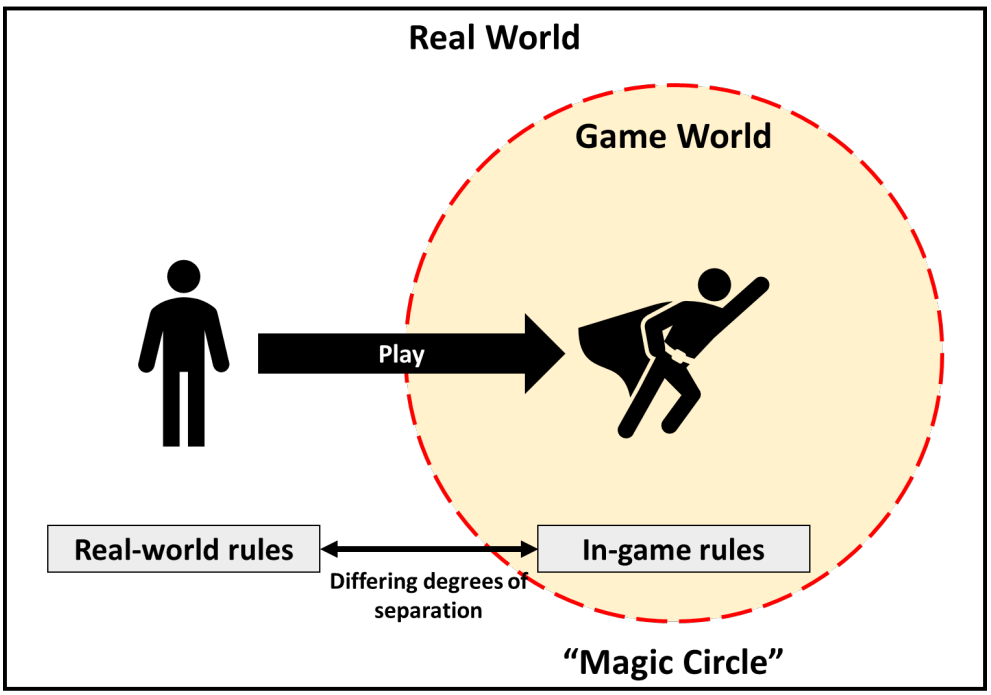

Figure 58 The magic circle as a porous membrane that separates real and virtual world to different degrees for different players

The dimensions of differences in the PX of German and Japanese players discussed above are however non-universal tendencies with varying salience across the German and Japanese macro-levels. This is especially evident in the results of the TAPs. Out of the nine German participants D02, D03 and D09 for example showed characteristics that were overall more common among Japanese players, i.e. a preference for linearity in gameplay and narrative elements, and in the case of D03 a preference for abstract art design. D09 also showed less aversion to repetitiveness than the other German players. Among the Japanese participants, J01, J02, J06 and J11 on the other hand preferred the nonlinear and realistic style of Dragon's Dogma over the other games. J01 and J02 explicitly mentioned the game's realistic graphics and higher degree of freedom as one of the reasons for their favorable evaluation.

Cultural factors influence players' experiences of digital games and shape their concrete preferences. The degree to which such tendencies are evident on the macro-level of (national) culture between German and Japanese players differs across the dimensions of differences outlined above. The experience of the shell elements of a game, its narrative and audio-visual representation, appear to be most strongly linked towards the players' national culture. Differences related to shell elements are related to differences based on societal norms and values, narrative preferences and character-centricity and world-centricity. Differences concerning a game's core elements, its mechanics and systems, are related to the dimensions

freedom and linearity, and aversion to repetitiveness. The dimension of realistic and abstract presentation, despite its focus on aesthetic elements, also includes mechanical implications, such as more realistic representations of physics in-game and is related to both elements, although it is more strongly associated with a game's shell. The differing expectations and reference frames influence both, the perception of core and shell elements, but also the game's overall technological quality.

Differences, such as preferences for open or linear gameplay, or for realistic or abstract graphical representations differ between, but also among German and Japanese players and across the selected games. Others, such as the described differences related to societal norms and values appear almost exclusively among either German or Japanese players and are recognizable in the overall corpus of user reviews. By adapting Elmezeny and Wimmer's (2018) framework for game cultures (see Section 2.3) it is possible to map these differences across different levels of (transnational) game and player culture.

A comparison of German and Japanese players' PX partially targets the macro-level of national game cultures. Through the most-different case design and the choice of Japanese games with a focus on narrative elements for the sample, it is however impossible to completely separate the macro-level of national game cultures from the meso-level and micro-level cultures surrounding the specific selected games or the sub-group of "Japanese games". The frequency, salience and distribution of differences found in the empirical analysis allows for some assumptions as to which dimensions of difference relate to overall German or Japanese player cultures. For example, differences that relate to norms and values, such as German players' concerns with the depiction of the female characters in Tales of Berseria, were found among all German participants in the TAPs, but were generally absent among the Japanese participants. This indicates a strong correlation between this dimension of differences and the macro-level of national games culture, that is societal norms and values influence PX on the macro-level of German and Japanese player culture.

When examining the dimension of realistic and abstract representation, a more complex picture emerges. Partially, differences here appear to be salient on the macro-level. Even for German players that disliked the game Dragon's Dogma, the game's realism was not mentioned critically. On the other hand, the game's degree of realism was mentioned by most Japanese participants in the TAP, be it positive or negative. Several German players on the other hand criticized the stylized, abstract art design of Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of

Berseria. Such criticism was absent among Japanese participants. Simply put, a photo-realistic art design and overall realism in a game is usually not perceived negatively by German players, while "too realistic" games can be a barrier for Japanese players. On the other hand, an abstract and colorful design can create such barriers for German, but usually not for Japanese players.

How the real or abstract representation within a game is evaluated differs between players across meso-level cultural groups. Some German participants found the art style of Ni no Kuni II cute, while several Japanese participants liked the realistic graphics of Dragon's Dogma. Such preferences, especially among the German participants, appear related to the participants' overall media preferences and consumption of Japanese pop culture. Regular consumers (D01, D02, D03, D07, D09) of anime and manga for example were arguably less critical of the abstract art style in three of the four games they played in the TAP sessions. D02, D03 and D09 were also the only German participants that disliked the game Dragon's Dogma. Time spent in Japan did however not noticeably influence German player's reports on the selected games.

Table 19 Dimensions of difference observed on the micro/meso- or macro-level in the user reviews and TAPs with "X" demarcating that differences found in the empirical analysis were observed on the micro/meso-level, the macro-level, or both

	Micro/Meso	**Macro**
Societal Norms and Values		X
Character-Centric and World-Centric		X
Narrative Preferences	X	
Realistic and Abstract Representation	X	
Freedom and Linearity	X	
Aversion to Repetition	X	
Expectations and Reference Frames	X	X

Differences in PX between German and Japanese players are rarely categorical and easily attributable to solely the macro-level. Instead they are differences of degree and tendency, where specific patterns of preferences or evaluations are more common in one group than in the other. Table 19 depicts the outlined dimensions of difference and whether differences associated with these dimensions tend to appear on the macro-level, that is whether they persistently appear between the German and Japanese players or are categorical in nature, or on the micro/meso-level of player groups or communities. The table does not differentiate between the micro-level, i.e. cultures on specific games, and the meso-level, i.e. the culture surrounding a group of games. While this is generally possible based on the dataset of user

reviews and within the outlined methodology, the high variance in number of German reviews between the selected games poses difficulties. For some of the games, such as Final Fantasy XV, a high number of reviews hints at a broad representation of differing player groups and cultures within the user reviews. This is related to their commercial success and "mainstream" status. Other games, such as ToCS and ToCS 2, have a lower number of reviews based on their nature as "niche title", that more closely reflect specific meso-level player groups and cultures.

As described above, differences based on societal norms and values such as the German criticism on the depiction of female characters in Tales of Berseria and to a lesser degree Kingdom Hearts III, are located on the macro-level. Differences in norms and values are arguably at the core of cultural identities, as they form the "basic values and assumptions" (Schein 1984) that are used to make sense of the world. As such, more than the location of these differences on the macro-level, a more surprising tendency is their limited scope. Across the analysis of user reviews and TAPs, the only apparent consistent difference between German and Japanese players related to societal values and norms was about the depiction of female characters, gender roles, and family structures within the games. Although less clearly, the difference between Japanese players' focus on characters and German players' focus on the game world and overall plot is also located on the macro-level. The tendency towards this was particularly clear in the TAPs, but also observed in the higher frequency of character related codes in the user reviews across all games, although here it appears more strongly in regard to the character' visual elements.

Narrative preferences in concern to sentimentality and humor within dialogue and narrative scenes are intricately linked to the dimension of societal values and norms. However, while the tendency in the TAPs similarly points towards differences on the macro-level, the user reviews, especially on the games ToCS, ToCS2 and Kingdom Hearts III showcase the existence of different interpretation patterns of the narrative elements in the game. Differences related to the dimension of realistic or abstract representation in a game are evident on the macro- and micro/meso-level. On the macro-level, the potential for a negative reception of "too realistic" graphic styles by Japanese players or "too colorful" and "too cute" art designs by the German players appear to be limited to either German or Japanese players. However, positive preferences for one or the other are stated by Japanese and German players, albeit in differing degrees, as described above. The description of visual elements being "too realistic" or "too cute" appears therefore more directly result from differing frames of reference, than from players' actual experiences.

Differences related to the dimensions of freedom and linearity and aversion to repetition are comparatively clearly anchored on the micro/meso-level. While the tendency runs towards a preference for more linear games and a lesser aversion (or different perception) of repetition among Japanese players, German players in the TAP sessions (D09) and several user reviews have shown similar characteristics and vice versa. Lastly, the differences related to players' expectations and frames of reference are evident on the macro- and meso-level, on the macro level as the results of differing media environments of German and Japanese players, on the micro/meso-level as the result of conscious media consumption outside of that media environment by individuals or groups of players. This relates closely to the anticipated experience of a game and influences the perception of all game elements. Taking players' expectations and frames of reference into account requires a critical examination of whether they truly influence their (momentary) experience of a game, or rather their reported experience, as the example of the different reactions to realistic or abstract graphical representation shows.

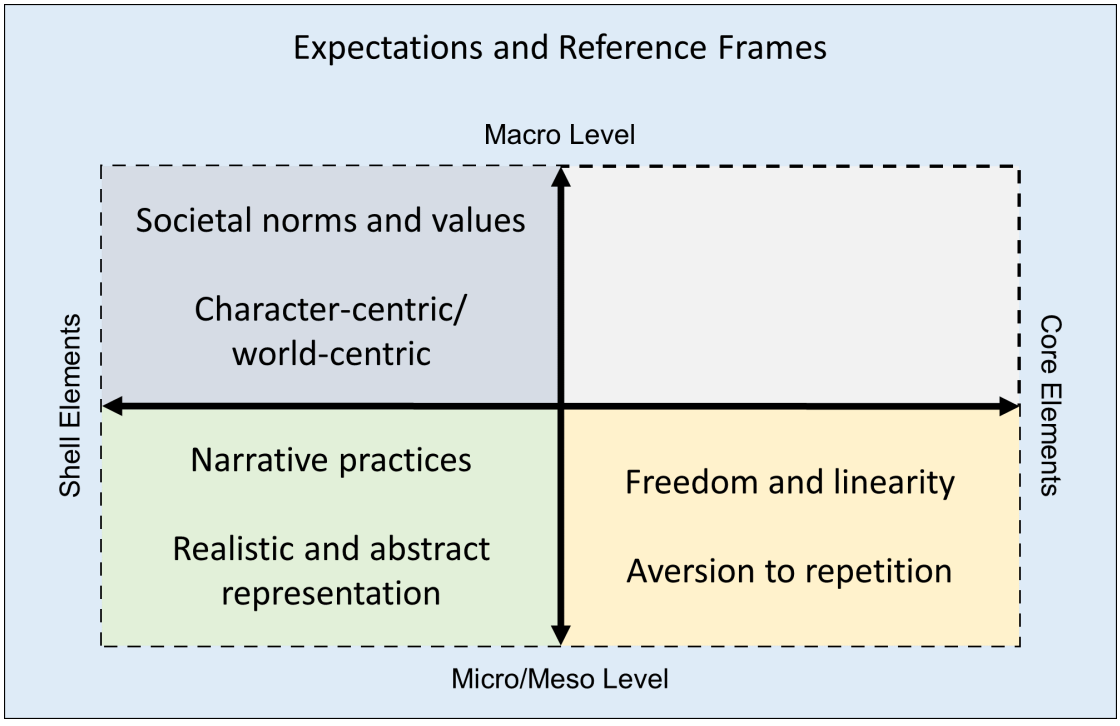

Figure 59 Overview of the dimensions of difference, their location between the macro- and micro/meso-level of culture and their relation to a game's core or shell elements

By mapping the dimensions of differences between the micro/meso- and the macro-level and based on their relation to a game's core or shell elements (see Figure 59) it becomes evident which kind of differences are related to which elements of a game and how they appear on the macro- or micro/meso-level. Generally, differences related to the experience of a game's core elements are not to salient on the macro-level and are normally apparent between different

player groups, albeit differently distributed within the larger German and Japanese groups of players. Differences regarding the experience of shell elements of a game are evident across the macro- and micro/meso-levels. The macro-level cultural identities of players noticeably affect their experience of the narrative and audio-visual elements of a game. The experience of a game's ludic elements is more strongly related to the (micro/meso-level) culture of subnational or transnational groups of players, with no categorical or consistent differences across the TAPs and all user reviews observed there. Differences in anticipated experience and differing reference frames of players influence the experience of all game elements, although often it is difficult to differentiate whether they influence momentary experience or rather the reported experience of a game.

The lack of clear differences in German and Japanese players' experience of the core elements of the selected games is highly interesting and cannot be fully explained with current models of culture or player-game interaction. A convincing explanation for this phenomenon is not possible within the scope of this thesis. Potential explanative approaches might investigate whether the mechanics of a game constitute a cultural universal (Rohn 2011), which arguably would require a closer look at what exactly the core and "mechanics" of a game are (e.g. Parlett 2017), or reutilize the symbolical concept of the magic circle (e.g. Consalvo 2009b; Matsunaga 2019; Stenros 2014) to answer the question of how real-world values influence our behavior and experiences within game worlds. Based on the results of this thesis, the cultural background of a player penetrates the magic circle and influences players' perception regarding shell elements. Conceptually, one could argue that the shell of a game is more closely related to the real world, while the more abstract game mechanics might be more strongly anchored within the magic circle, and therefore less directly impacted by player culture.

One further level of culture that needs to be addressed is that inherent within the sample of games for this study and the question of their "Japaneseness" (see Section 2.2). PX is the result of player-game interaction within the respective cultural contexts that the player and game are situated in. The games selected as part of the most-different case design for this study are games created by Japanese developers and to varying degrees exhibit cultural marker identifying them as such to the German players. The perceived Japaneseness was frequently addressed in various contexts by the German players in the TAPs and in the user reviews. There are two overarching but contrary narratives, related to this Japaneseness, evident in the data. That of it creating potential barriers for German players' engagement with the game and that of it providing them with an aura of being unique and exotic.

The “Japaneseness” of a game is not a direct outcome of it being developed in Japan. Instead, it is the result of design choices in concern to audio-visual presentation, narrative and gameplay, which the player interprets as “Japanese”, based on popular discourses and their prior experiences. Among the games selected for the TAPs, Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria were frequently framed as Japanese games by the German participants, based on the abstract, stylized graphical representation, the character design, and gameplay elements. Dragon’s Dogma on the other hand wa generally regarded as a “Western game”, that German players felt more “used to”. D04 mentions this in his overall evaluation of all games, where he argues that he places Tales of Beseria before Dragon’s Dogma, as the former felt “more unique”. He claims that “Dragon’s Dogma was more accessible and fun as a game” but “it did not provide any of the uniqueness of the other games” and was comparable to “many Western games from which it does not stand out”. D01 argues similarly during his TAP session, stating that he likes Dragon’s Dogma, but knows “that there are better games out there doing what it does”. The open world design and realistic presentation of Dragon’s Dogma felt more “natural” (D06) to the German players. D02 who personally disliked the game because of problems with the game’s mechanics, described its setting and visual design as “more accessible”. On the other hand, she personally preferred the “cute” and “lighthearted” style of Ni no Kuni II.

The perception of specific design choices and elements in games as being “Japanese” is not limited to visual elements. It extends towards mechanics and narrative elements as well. In the user reviews, a majority of the selected games are attributed by reviewers with different aspects of Japaneseness. A core mechanical element that is framed thus is turn-based combat, for example in Persona 5, ToCS and ToCS2, or Octopath Traveler. The link between Japanese games and turn-based combat systems was also mentioned by German participants in the TAPs. Although none of the games included such a system, D01, D03 and D07 mentioned that they were expecting or would have preferred turn-based combat. German reviewers also frequently mention the “unique humor” or “deep characters” as uniquely “Japanese” elements within several of the games.

The “Japaneseness” of Japanese games, mentioned by the German players relates to three different narratives.

Japanese games as classics and source of nostalgia

For many players, Japanese games in general and JRPGs in particular appear inextricably linked to their memories of earlier games. In the user reviews, German players made constant

comparisons of the selected games to “the great classics” and described feelings of nostalgia (cf. Mallindine 2016). Elements like a turn-based combat system and party-based combat, stylized graphics or a distinctive user interface design are frequently framed by German players as “harkening back to the good old times” of console RPGs. This is also evident among the German participants of the TAPs. D09 for example praised Ni no Kuni II’s world map, arguing that it is “great how classic the game is, in the sense that it has a world map. And interesting vehicles. It really reminds me of the PS1 Final Fantasy age”. The game Octopath Traveler (Square Enix Business Division 11 and Aquire 2018) was arguably designed to provide an experience, that reminds players of console RPGs from the 1980s and 1990s. Playing such a game can provide players with affective gratifications, linked to memories of their prior experiences. The strong role of nostalgia in discourses on Japanese games also highlight the central role that they played in the childhood of many current players.

Instead of a sense of nostalgia, other German players, especially in the TAP session, and some Japanese reviewers do however perceive the adherence to certain design principles as “outdated”. For example, the only partial dub Ni no Kuni II, or the completely absent dub in the Japanese version of Dragon Quest XI was criticized by German and Japanese players as “too old-fashioned”. For German participants not used to JRPGs, the system of save points in Ni no Kuni II, Kingdom Hearts III and Tales of Berseria was argued to be “not necessary” and “not up to the current standards”. In this sense, Japanese games, especially when they are part of established franchises, are in an unenviable position of satisfying often contrary demands by players.

Japanese games as unique or weird

Aside from feelings of nostalgia, Japanese games are frequently depicted as unique in concern to their design, setting, plot and characters, but also in regard to their mechanics. As detailed in Chapter 3, the game Nier: Automata is for example framed as a “uniquely Japanese games” because of its overall story, its visual design, the characters and the erratic changes in the game’s core gameplay, with one reviewer mentioning that this is “only something our friends of Japan can come up with” (D_Rev_077). Games like Yakuza 0 (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2017) are depicted in similar ways. How this uniqueness is received by players does however vary. Some German players depict it as innovative, exotic, and unique, as characteristics that differentiate Japanese games from games produced in the West and provide unique stimuli and gratifications to their players, that can also be linked to nostalgia. For others, it effectively

creates barriers towards the enjoyment of a game and is framed as “too weird”, “absurd”, “illogical”, “over-the-top” or “childish”.

At least for the German participants in the TAP sessions, some correlation seems to exist between the reception of Japanese games and general media usage. The narrative elements of Japanese games are intricately linked towards other forms of Japanese pop culture. For players who do not regularly play Japanese games but frequently watch Anime or Manga (e.g. D02) the suspension of disbelief, arguably required to enjoy a game (Brown 2012), appears easier. Time spent by German players in Japan does however not necessarily seem to influence players’ perception of the content. By the time of his participation in the study, D08 for example had spent more than three years in Japan and was fluent in Japanese. The narrative of the selected games did however not appear more accessible to him as his frequent mentions of the “absurdity” and “weirdness” of the games’ narrative and visual elements show.

D03, D09 and some reviewers argue that for them, this “weirdness” can be mitigated by using the Japanese dub of a game, instead of the English or German dub, as it “feels more authentic” and “better fits the characters”. A preference for the (original) Japanese dub is common among fans of Japanese anime (Fukunaga 2006) and partially stems from the bad quality of English dubs in early localized anime. D03 and D09 both, however also claimed that the Japanese voiceover was a “better fit” for the characters and helped to “convey the story”. D03 is highly proficient in Japanese, while D09 professed to have “basic skills”. For both however, the original Japanese dub, especially in Tales of Berseria, seemed to lower barriers towards the immersion of the game’s narrative elements.

Japanese games as educative and authentic

Lastly, for some players Japanese games are perceived to be informative or educative on Japanese culture. This is especially the case for games like Yakuza 0 or Persona 5, that are set in (fictional) depictions of real-world Japan. Players argued that these games helped them to better understand Japanese culture and society. They were used as a form of virtual tourism, as one reviewer mentioned that he saw the game Yakuza 0 as “a substitute for a vacation in Japan”. The use of the Japanese dub, included in some of the games is also mentioned by players, to heighten authenticity and to learn the Japanese language.

The perception of some Japanese games as educative windows into Japanese culture is largely positively connotated. Within the other two narratives, Japaneseness can however be seen as a advantage or a disadvantage, depending on the game and player. Iwabuchi (2002) argues that

Japanese cultural products meant for export, including games, are often produced in ways the erase any "cultural odor" of these games. The "odorless" products do not display direct references toward their Japanese origin. The setting, characters and story are designed to appeal to a wide audience, without the potential for cultural barriers (Carlson and Corliss 2011). Games like Dragon's Dogma or Resident Evil 7 are not linked towards Japan by their players.

As evident in this thesis, Japaneseness in games can however also be a distinctive advantage, that helps to position Japanese games in the global market and makes them stand out. Games such as Persona 5 or Yakuza 0 are not successful despite, but partially because of their Japanese setting. Japanese game developers, publishers and mediating agents, such as localizers, can either attempt to minimize the Japaneseness of their games, to make them more accessible to Western audiences, or to emphasize it, and position them as exotic and unique in the global market. This has direct ramifications on who will play them.

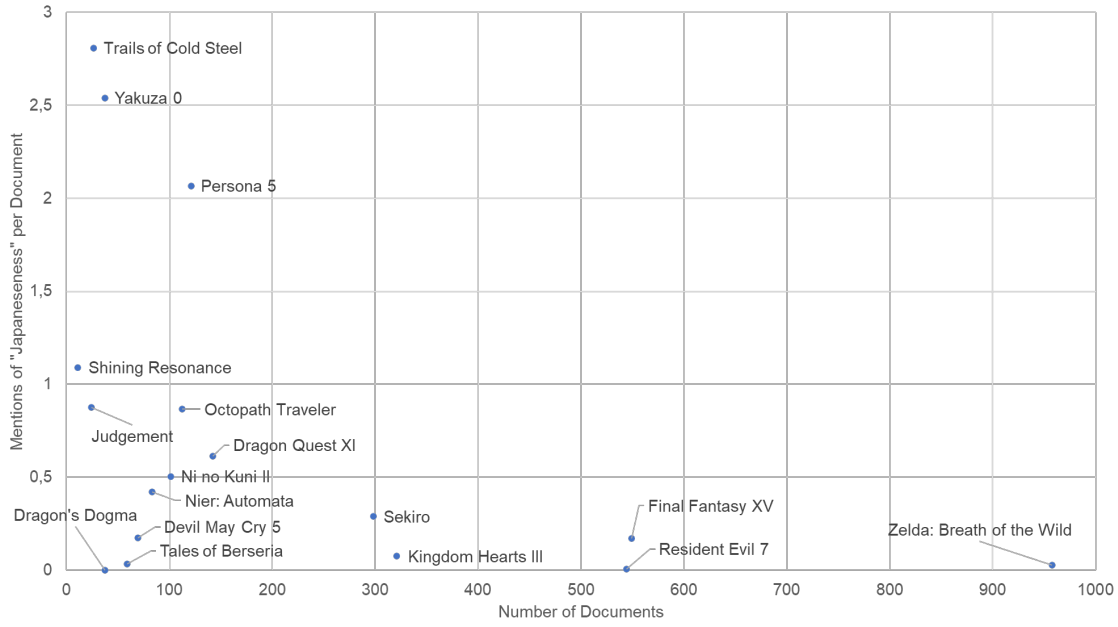

Figure 60 Plot of the selected games calculated based on the total number of user reviews and mentions of Japaneseness (as described in the dictionary) per review in the German document set

The user reviews provide to varying degrees insights into the specific German player cultures surrounding Japanese games, especially JRPGs. Across the games in the sample, there are differences in how strongly they are described as "Japanese". Figure 60 shows each game in the sample. The y-axis displays how often words belonging to the "Japanese" category in the dictionary (see Appendix D-2) appear per document in the German document groups. The x-axis depicts the total number of user reviews within each German document group. The former is an indicator for how strongly German players frame a game as "Japanese". The latter is an

indicator of the overall commercial success and the degree to which a game can be regarded as "mainstream" within the greater German ecology of digital games. The total number of documents is however also dependent on a game's release date and therefore provides only a limited basis for a comparison.

Unsurprisingly, in user reviews on games set in Japan, such as Yakuza 0 or Persona 5, Japan is mentioned frequently. However, the games most strongly linked towards Japan appear to be ToCS and ToCS2. Partially, this is related towards the low overall number of reviews of the game. Generally, among the games within the sample, a lower number of user reviews, especially in the German document set, correlates with a more positive description of a game. The more reviews there are, the broader the opinions reflected in them. The reason that ToCS is almost universally positively depicted in the German reviews, while more criticism levied in regard to the commercially successful and critically more acclaimed Persona 5 is arguably because of the reviews for the former being largely written by fans of the franchise and JRPGs in general, while the latter is also reviewed by players with no preference for the JRPG genre, that played the game because of its good reception (Brückner et al. 2019). The frequent mention of the Japaneseness of ToCS or to a lesser degree Octopath Traveler, hints at the strong role of JRPG fans or overall Japanophile players in the discourses surrounding these games. Games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath on the Wild on the other hand have their own cultures surrounding them, which are less related to their Japanese origin and more to their specific franchise. Such cultures appear more similar between the German and Japanese document sets than those with a high representation of Japanophile reviewers.

In conclusion, the cultural element in player-game interaction does not only consist of a player's cultural backgrounds but is also the results of the cultural factors inherent in and surrounding the selected games. Player experience across cultural borders is the result of differing interacting levels of player and game culture (see Figure 9), that shape all levels of the player experience to differing degrees. The macro-level divide between German and Japanese players appears to be particularly relevant for the explanation of differences in PX regarding the aesthetic and narrative elements of a game, while micro- and meso-level identities and subcultures are more relevant in regard to the experience of a game's mechanics. No clear difference between German and Japanese players was observed in the experience of the selected games' mechanics, instead differences are located on the sub-national or transnational level. Some German players exhibit similar preferences than Japanese players and vice versa. The differences observed in concern to frequency might however hint at a

different allocation of preference groups and game subcultures within Germany and Japan but can arguably be attributed to structural market differences and differing player cultures represented in the German and Japanese user reviews.

5.3 Discussion of the Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical and methodological framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3 has proven effective in comparatively analyzing PX across different levels of culture. Through the triangulation of results, it is possible to minimize the influence of, or at least account for, the differing biases inherent in the two sources of data. The framework is also highly flexible. It is possible to freely choose which games to include in the corpus for analysis. Games with more reviews tend to (but not necessarily do) reflect a broader range of players, while games with fewer reviews appear more homogenous and often reflect specific player cultures or the opinions of a specific subset of players. Selecting different games or groups of games makes it possible to easily examine different levels of culture, depending on the desired unit of analysis and specific interest.

Table 20 Levels of culture, how they can be identified and how differences can be attributed to them

Level	Target	Identifiable by:	Differences through comparison
Macro	Regional/National (Germany-Japan)	High number of reviews and match with TAPs	Categorical differences; Salient differences across games
Meso	Sub- or transnational groups displaying shared patterns of reported experiences	Small number of reviews but cohesive patterns of evaluations that deviate from TAPs	Differences of degree, local differences on a specific game
Micro	Individuals	Small number of reviews and non-cohesive evaluation, TAPs	Differences on a high level of granularity

The triangulation of results with TAPs helps to check for inherent biases in the user reviews and serves as a method to calibrate the analytical model, as this makes it possible to include the data of theoretically selected participants in the corpus. For example, the German user reviews on Kingdom Hearts III were far more positive than the results of the TAPs would suggest. This indicates that the German reviewers of the game differs from the majority of participants in the TAP sessions and suggests that the reviews reflect a more cohesive subgroup of players, that is a specific meso-level culture. Table 20 depicts the analytical macro-, meso-

and micro level of culture, how user reviews and TAPs can be used to identify the presence of a particular level of culture and what kind of differences are attributed per level.

The ideal sample size and length of the TAP session arguably depends on the unit of analysis, the concrete research interest, and the available resources of the investigating researcher. Play sessions using TAP are highly time and cost intensive. One point that directly influences the parameters of the TAP is the selection of games. If the focus is put on games with simple controls, where the core mechanics remain constant over time without a strong influence of narrative elements (e.g. puzzle games, arcade games), short periods, for example 30 minutes, are potentially enough for participants to grasp the nature of the game. The potential gain of longer play sessions would be offset by the costs. Games such as those chosen for this study require however more time, depending on the concrete research question. In this study, participants spent approximately 2.5 hours per game. For a comparison of PX across the TAP participants, this is not problematic, as all participants engage with the games under the same set of restraints and their experiences are therefore comparable. It potentially does limit the comparability of the TAP data with sources such as user reviews, as reviewers usually spend more time on a game before they review it and therefore might experience different aspects of the game, that strongly influence the overall evaluation. Often 2.5 hours is not enough time to judge the overall quality of a game, as many systems are introduced later in the game. For researchers interested in, for example, the overall reception of a game, TAPs would need to cover significantly more time, for example a compete playthrough, which, depending on the game, could require more than 100 hours per participant.

This poses a significant hurdle. In such cases, increasing the number of analyzed user reviews and potentially widening the analysis to available data, such as “let’s plays” on YouTube or Twitch and related viewer comments could conceivably be used as a substitute for the TAPs. This has some drawbacks, as professional streamers usually aim to entertain, and their reported experiences are strongly influenced by that. An analysis solely based on user reviews is possible but loses much of the advantages of the research design. In that case, small-scale TAPs or interviews with players can be used as a method of triangulation and to identify biases within the user reviews.

The number of user reviews that should be analyzed also depends on the concrete goal of a study. In quantitative analyses, for example with the dictionary developed during this project, it is generally possible to examine statistically significant sample sizes of overall players or

specific player groups. Qualitative close readings can be used to supplement the analysis, and should especially be considered in case of outliers, that diverge from the overall trend. For explorative questions, a qualitative analysis, such as the one realized in this thesis, provides clearer insights, and can be used to calibrate another dictionary for quantitative validation. The amount of user reviews that needs to be analyzed varies, depending on the concrete research interest and the unit of analysis, but should follow the principles of theoretical saturation. User reviews are an underutilized rich source of data that can be employed in a wide range of inquiries on players' experiences. The use of (grounded theory) data coding allows for an analysis on different levels of granularity and is arguable the best way to structure the text data for analysis. It would however profit from multiple coders, which would make it possible to include a measure of intercoder reliability as one mark of the overall robustness of results.

The framework used to generate these categories is applicable to different levels of culture and different units of analysis. The methods described in this thesis can also be adjusted to different sets of time or cost constraints. The number of participants necessary for the TAP depends on the variables that need to be accounted for within a research design. In this study, fewer participants, for example five German and five Japanese players would arguably have yielded generally similar results, but the inclusion of more participants heightens the chance for diverging opinions being present in the corpus, that can lead to new insights. This was for example the case with D09, who displayed different characteristics regarding specific game elements than the rest of the German participants. At least, five players per examined target group should be present to account for hidden variables that might influence the results.

On its own, the categories that emerged in this analysis and the dictionary based upon them form an empirically grounded model of player experience that can be used for further research. As we now know in detail what players talk (and write) about, when they talk about games (Ryan et al. 2015), it is possible to focus on comparisons of player experience, not limited to the questions asked in this thesis. For example, scholars interested in the effects of different game design choices on player experience can use the categories that emerged in this thesis for a quantitative examination. When looking at games with different affordances than those selected for this study (e.g. multiplayer games), amending the code system based on the methodology outlined in this thesis might however be necessary, especially when targeting a high level of granularity in the analysis.

For different inquiries, the components of the framework used in this study can also be adapted (see Figure 61). The concept of player experience is in this thesis essentially used as a construct to conceptualize the targeted variable of player-game interaction, while the ontologies of games and play are used as an analytical construct in the discussion of the results. The methodology outlined in this thesis can however also be used to examine different variables, such as broader audience reception or specific concepts such as immersion. While user reviews and TAPs were used for this study, other forms of data, such as player chats, can be analyzed in the same ways. If used in a cross-cultural context, one cornerstone of the framework remains however the differentiated multi-level understanding of culture, which is necessary to clearly define the target group of an analysis (e.g. macro- or meso-level).

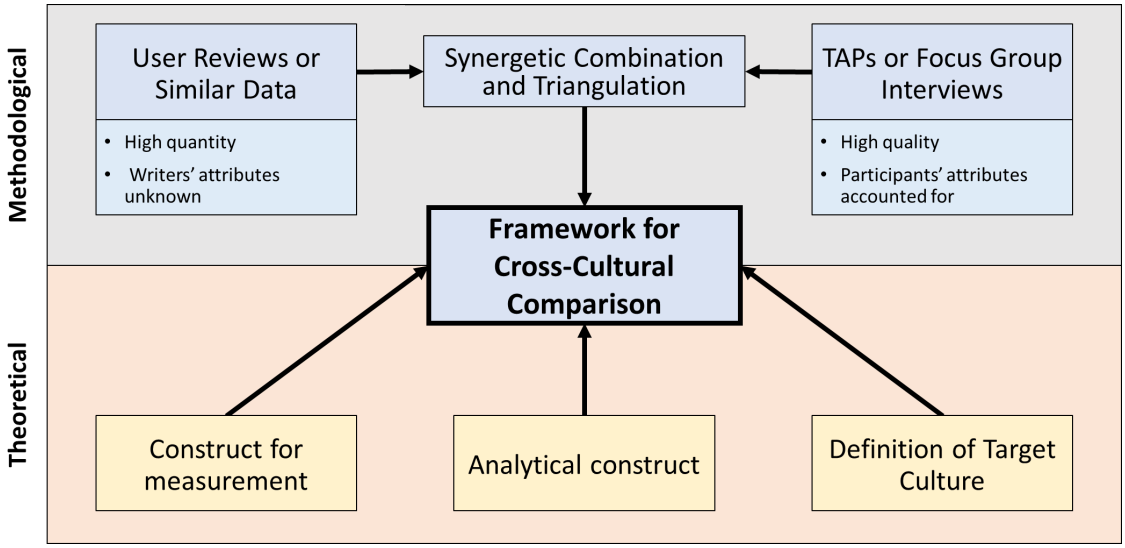

Figure 61 Abstraction of the developed framework for use in other areas of interest

5.4 Significance to Current Research and Existing Theoretical Models

The main contributions of this thesis lie in (1) the design of a framework for the cross-cultural examination of player experience, (2) the resulting categories that form an empirically grounded model of player experience by which a comprehensive cross-cultural comparison becomes possible, and (3) in the results of the comparison itself, which show how exactly culture influences player-game interaction. The developed framework and resulting categories are the result of a qualitative bottom-up approach to data analysis, that accounts for subtle differences in the data made possible due to the author's familiarity with both cultural target contexts and languages.

The concrete results provide implications for the overall study of games and players, for the particular debates surrounding the reception of Japanese games, as well as for existing theories on cross-cultural media consumption in general. This thesis presents empirical evidence of how the cultural background of players shapes their experiences and evaluations of games. The experience of shell elements appears at least partially influenced by the macro-level dimension of national or regional culture, while the perception of the core elements of a game appears to be largely independent from it. More influential than the national divide are arguably specific meso-level player cultures, that show similar preference patterns across regional or linguistic borders. Current research on player experience and player-game interaction benefits from these insights, as it allows for the construction of more comprehensive models of player-game interaction to explain the emergence of differing player preferences.

Ermi and Mäyrä (2007, 51), after outlining their SCI model of gameplay experience, arrive at the question of whether "pre-existing expectations and experiences with related games determine the gameplay experience of a new one". This thesis demonstrates that such prior expectations and experiences influence the experience of a game in various ways, by providing a reference frame for players' experiences. This becomes particularly clear in the cross-cultural design employed in this study. What players perceive to be "innovative", "classic" or simply "normal" depends on games and other media they interact with. The media environments in which players are located differ greatly between regions. Japanese players have for example access to different games than German players. They are also arguably more used to the audio-visual and narrative practices found in Japanese pop cultural products than German players. This shapes players experiences and evaluations of game content.

The results of this research provide empirical and theoretical insights into German and Japanese player cultures, the effects of a game's perceived cultural background on PX, and the reception of Japanese games by German players. The perceived cultural provenance of a game serves as a cue for meaning-making that suggests the inclusion of specific content to German players. The thesis has clarified the three common narratives associated with Japanese games among German players. This enables a more differentiated understanding of the way German players interact with and perceive Japanese games, and contributes towards current debates on Japaneseness in games, by clarifying that Japaneseness, present in various forms and to varying degrees in the selected games, is ultimately what players make of it.

Scholarship on games benefits from considering the results of this cross-cultural examination and the framework developed to attain them. Research on games and games culture, is often limited towards research on single regions (cf. Bialas et al. 2014; Liboriussen and Martin 2016). Cross-cultural comparative research, such as the present study, is necessary to better understand how people interact with games and what place games hold in our societies (cf. Elmezeny and Wimmer 2018). This leads to the more accurate understanding of games, players and their cultures that is necessary for current academic research on games, and specifically in the area of game studies, to contribute to the various debates on games that shape our world. In particular, this thesis contributes towards such an understanding, by outlining a theoretical and methodological framework for cross-cultural comparative games research, that can be adapted for other projects. The methodological framework is not limited to the examination of macro-level cultures but can also be used to study player and game cultures on the micro- and meso-level. The methods employed are scalable and can be user to examine smaller or larger corpora of data, with a variable number of TAPs, based on time and cost restraints.

The results of the study show similarities but also differences with prior studies (see Section 1.3). Japanese players' more frequent mentions and broader discussions of in-game characters are consistent with Ngai's (2005) assertion that Japanese players feel a greater sense of character attachment. Tsang and Prendergast (2009) in their cross-cultural analysis of Chinese and American computer game reviews find that Chinese reviews are more positive than American reviews. They argue that this is caused by the difference of America being more individualistic while China is more collectivistic, as measured by Hofstede's typology. This could not be affirmed within this study, as Japanese user reviews appear more negative, although Japan is described as more collectivistic than Germany in Hofstede's typology. On the other hand, Japan's higher score for uncertainty avoidance correlates with the arguably stronger preference for linear games shown by Japanese players. The difference in aversion to repetition, although only attributable towards the meso-level, show some similarity to Hall's (1989) model of low- and high-context cultures, wherein the high-context cultures (Japan) are more concerned with processes, while low-context cultures (Germany) are more concerned with results.

Some results of Zagal and Tomuro's (2013) quantitative analysis of American and Japanese user reviews appear to correlate with the results of the qualitative analysis in this study. They find that Japanese players more often use the word story in a negative context than American reviewers, arguing that "[since] Japanese players place more emphasis on story, their overall

appreciation of a game is strongly dependent on the quality of [a game's] narrative" (Zagal and Tomuro 2013, 6). This confirms to the results of this study, where negative overall evaluations of a game in Japanese reviews appear to coincide with a high frequency of mentions on the narrative elements in the game, such as is the case in ToCS. Zagal and Tomuro also find that Japanese player's expectations towards Western games appear lower than towards Japanese games. The results of this study indicate that this might have changed with the release of the PlayStation 4, as Japanese players appear to hold lower expectations towards Japanese games, especially in concern to graphic quality, than towards Western games.

The results of this thesis also conform to some commonly held, but not, at least openly accessibly, empirically validated assumptions about differences between Japanese and Western players by game developers and mediating agents, such as localizers. Carlson and Corliss (2011) mention for example, that Japanese developers believe Japanese players to be more susceptible towards game induced motion sickness. The mention of *gamen-yoi* in the Japanese user reviews and by J01 and J10 seems to confirm this, as no similar mention was made by German participants or found within the German user reviews. They also touch upon the "misleading generalization" (Carlson and Corliss 2011, 9) that violent games are not popular in Japan. While such a tendency was observed to some extent, as more Japanese players seemed critical of the realistic display of violence in Dragon's Dogma, such preferences greatly vary on the meso-level of player groups. They are thus indeed, a "misleading generalization".

Aside from its theoretical and empirical contributions towards game studies, the results of this thesis are also of potential use to media and communication scholars engaging in comparative research. Similar to the situation within game studies, comparative research within media studies still appears as an "immature and underdeveloped" (Esser 2012), albeit emerging field (Stehling et al. 2016). The growing interest into cross-cultural research designs within media and communication studies (Hepp 2009; Stehling et al. 2016; Esser and Vliegenthart 2017) is arguably a result of globalization and the proliferation of new media, forming a new frontier for these disciplines in which traditional macro-level national and regional divides lose their meaning. Games and their players are pioneers of such changes, placing game studies in a prime position to contribute towards the establishment of effective concepts and methodologies to tackle these new challenges. The framework developed in this study can serve as a model for other (transnational) cross-cultural comparisons of media cultures or audiences and provides the basis for the development of best practices. Moreover, the insights into how player culture affects the experience of a game, and therefore extends into the virtual (game) world

can prove theoretically stimulating for other disciplines examining the relationship between new media and their users.

Finally, the results of this thesis are also of interest to scholars aiming to explain audience behavior. In his model of cultural proximity, Straubhaar (1991, 2003) argues that people generally prefer to consume media that is produced within their own cultural context (cf. Ksiazek and Webster 2008). Rohn (2009, 2011) builds upon this notion in her lacuna and universal Model which provides "a theoretical classification, systematization and terminology of the various reasons that may lie behind the cross-cultural success or failure of media content" (Rohn 2011, 632). Her model consists of three universals, that explain the success of media content produced outside of the audience's cultural environment and three lacunae, that explain the lack of such success. In her words (Rohn 2011, 638):

> The Lacuna and Universal Model argues that media content produced outside the cultural environment of the audience is successful with that audience when it (1) provides for Content Universals, meaning that it exhibits attributes that appeal to audiences across cultures; (2) allows for Audience-created Universals, meaning that it is open to alternative readings; or (3) has been successfully marketed by media publishers and transmitters, a phenomenon here termed Company-created Universal. The suggested model further argues that audiences either do not select or do not enjoy foreign media content when it has obvious (1) Content Lacunae, meaning that audiences do not find the content relevant or appropriate; (2) Capital Lacunae, meaning that audiences do not understand the content; or (3) Production Lacunae, meaning that they do not like the style of the media content.

The results of this analysis arguably pertain to all forms of universals described by Rohn. The perceived "Japaneseness" of Japanese games described by German players indicates a content universal. Games in general, because of their interactivity and comparative openness seem predisposed towards audience universals. German players mention of using Japanese games for "virtual tourism" in Japan or to learn the Japanese language also point towards such uses. The role of company-created universals is evident in the marketing efforts of publishers, developers and localizers. Among Rohn's lacunae, capital lacunae appear most relevant towards this thesis, as barriers towards understanding Japanese content were evident among some German players.

However, while the lacuna and universal model indeed offers a useful terminology to explain cross-cultural media success, it does not directly lead to an analytically valuable explanation for the way Japanese games are received by German players. Like Straubhaar, Rohn built her model upon research on television audiences, although she also examines print media. This leads to an implicit focus on macro-level cultures divided by region or language. It does not account well for the sub- and trans-national meso-level cultures, that this thesis found to be of greater relevance to explain the preferences of digital game players. Content universals, for example, warrant attributes that appeal to audiences across cultures. The reception of Japanese games by German players however often emphasize the peculiarities and "weirdness" of Japanese games. Among German meso-level cultures of players, the inability to fully understand the content of some Japanese games, effectively a content lacuna, is perceived as one of the games' main appeals (cf. Carlson and Corliss 2011). The results of this thesis can therefore also be understood as a stimulus for cross-cultural media theories, to pay more attention towards the dynamic cultures surrounding media on the meso-level, which can behave and act in ways that are contrary to the impressions gleaned from an analysis focused on the macro-level of overall national cultures. Theories such as Rohn's lacunae and universals provide a highly valuable framework for the systematic description of differences in media success, but they can gain a greater analytical value by accounting for the differing levels of culture, outlined by Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018) and operationalized in this thesis.

5.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Studies

This study faces several limitations. First, due to the most-different/most-similar case research design, it focuses exclusively on Japanese games. Including Western games into the sample would invalidate the advantages of the most-similar case design and introduce new game immanent variables to account for. Despite methodological challenges, a comparative analysis of German and Japanese user reviews that includes a larger sample of games, by utilizing the dictionary created for this study can however provide valuable insights into different player cultures not directly touched upon in this study. While the German reception of Japanese games was examined as part of this thesis, a next logical step would be the examination of how "foreign games" are received and experienced by Japanese players.

Second, as touched upon in Section 5.2, the comparison of German and Japanese user reviews faces the problem of differing groups of players being represented within them. Most games in

the sample are arguably played by a broader range of players in Japan, than in Germany. ToCS is for example part of the Legend of Heroes series of games, a major franchise in Japan, that is less well-known in Germany. German reviewers of the game are more likely to be part of group of fans of the franchise, which strongly influences the game's overall evaluation. In the contexts of this study, this is valuable data in itself, as it provides insights into the meso-level cultures surrounding the game. Through the inclusion of more mainstream titles, such as Resident Evil 7 or Final Fantasy XV, the comparison to broader German player cultures was made possible. On the other hand, insights into Japanese meso-level cultures are harder to gain within the scope of the dataset for this study, as most of the selected games are arguably part of the Japanese mainstream, with a comparatively broad range of players that review them. One game that arguably attracted a smaller (meso-level) audience in Japan and Germany is the game Shining Resonance Refrain. To account more strongly for Japanese meso-level cultures, a broader sample of games, that includes genres aside from in Japan highly popular RPGs, becomes necessary. Aside from cultural differences, there are however likely also more distinct differences between the intended target groups within and outside of Japan. Kingdom Hearts III is an example of this. In Japan, the game was released with a CERO rating of "A", meaning that it is free to play for all ages. In Germany, it was restricted to players over the age of 12, somewhat limiting the potential target group of players.

The coding process of user reviews and TAPs was accompanied by difficulties regarding lexical differences in the German and Japanese language in general and game-related lingo in particular. For example, the word "gameplay" central in German discussions of games is only rarely used by Japanese players. Instead, Japanese players talk and write about "systems" (*shisutemu*). The usage context of the word "system" is not completely identical with the German "gameplay", as it covers a wider array of concepts. Differing sub-codes were used in the first round of coding to account for this. Similarly, and discussed more broadly in Section 5.1, the Japanese term "worldview" (*sekaikan*) can refer to various concepts, such as the audio-visual design of the game world or the game world's background story (i.e. its "lore"). In the first round of coding, a separate category was created for utterances in which the meaning of the explicit meaning of the word was unclear. In the final code system, such utterances are sorted into *Worldbuilding* code in the category *Audio-Visual*.

Third, although theoretical considerations, such as age, sex, game experience and media consumption were considered in the selection of participants for the TAP as far as possible, the German and Japanese participants diverge in some respects. The German participants are on

average older (25.11 years) than the Japanese participants (23.36). Among the nine German participants, only two were female, in comparison to six of the eleven Japanese participants. Furthermore, while the majority of play sessions were conducted in a laboratory setting on campus, four of the German participants (D01, D02, D06 and D07) were recorded in Germany, in their homes. This was necessary to include German players with no experience of living in Japan. One Japanese participant (J11) was recorded at home, because of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020.

Fourth, the data gained from the TAP sessions enables the examination of the player's momentary PX. However, participants' experiences were also affected by the laboratory setting, and the need to talk while they play. Thinking-aloud actively interferes with players' ability to immerse themselves in a game. This has ramifications on the quality of the gained data. Many participants displayed for example problems in navigating through the game worlds of the games. They got lost. Partially, this could be related towards the need to divide their cognitive resources between playing the game and voicing their thought on it. Participants' experiences of the games are also shaped by their play styles, which provides some difficulties when comparing them. Some participants progressed faster through the games than others. D03 spent four example more than 40 minutes fighting enemies on the world map in Ni no Kuni II, while D07 spent less than ten minutes on it. Differences are more pronounced in Dragon's Dogma, which allows for a broader diversity of playing styles. D06 spent most of his play session repeatedly dying in the game's DLC area.

These limitations point the way towards further research necessary to validate the results of this study. The qualitative approach employed in this thesis was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how player and game cultures relate to each other and shape a player's PX. From the results of the analysis emerge several testable assumptions that warrant further quantitative validation. Such validation is necessary on two levels. First, in concern to the concrete results of this thesis regarding Japanese and German players' PX. The dictionary created for the analysis of user reviews is the foundation of a systematic tool for a quantitative comparative analysis of Japanese and German players' reports on their PX. The next logical step lies in utilizing and evaluating that tool on a greater corpus of Japanese and Western games. Second, the theoretical model that resulted from this thesis needs to be tested empirically, across different cultural pairings. Despite the most-different case design, used in this study, differences on the macro-level of culture appear moderate. It is possible that for macro-cultural pairings with a greater cultural proximity, for example between Western European countries,

the macro dimension of culture is even less relevant for PX when compared to the meso-level of player groups. Again, this highlights the applicability of the framework developed in this thesis, as it can be flexibly adapted towards different levels of cultures.

Specific results of this study, that provide potentially fruitful vantages for quantitative validation or reexamination on the concrete preferences of German and Japanese players include te following assertion.

- A higher problem awareness on the oversexualization of characters by German players
- Japanese players' greater focus on a game's characters versus German players' greater focus on the game world
- The German preference for less frequent and less open displays of sentiments, such as affection, between in-game characters
- Japanese players' potential aversions towards realistic graphical representation versus German players' potential aversion towards abstract representations
- Japanese players' preference for more linearly structured experiences versus German players' preference for open gameplay
- German players higher aversion towards repetitiveness

This thesis finds that most of these results are located on the sub/trans-national meso-level of player and game cultures, instead of on the macro-level of overall German and Japanese players. They are differences of degree, not of category, observed in regard to specific games, and emerging from specific cultures presented in the reports on them. Quantitative tests of these statements have the potential to verify this conclusion and to measure their effect strength. They can also be used to test the related inferences, namely that (1) national (macro-level) culture exerts a greater influence on players' experience of shell elements, where some nigh categorical differences are evident, while (2) the experience of a game's core elements is largely independent from national culture, aside from (3) influencing the relative distribution of gameplay preferences and specific player cultures within it. A further fruitful vantage of inquire is the realization of longitudinal studies, for example by comparing user reviews or professional reviews written in different points in time. This would make it possible to account for differences over time, for example due to processes such as globalization.

One aspect that appears to play a central role in the formation German and Japanese players' overall preferences lies in their respective frames of reference, that is the sum of their prior media experiences. German and Japanese players frequently compare the games they play with

other games and other media. The concrete media they compare them to differ. German players were found to be more likely to compare the games in the sample with Western games, Western media franchises or with Japanese franchises popular in Germany. Japanese players compare the games more frequently to Japanese games, often to games that are less familiar to Western players. They also reference media, such as light novels, that are part of the larger media ecology surrounding Japanese games, but usually not accessible for the average German player.

The player experience of German and Japanese players is thus shaped by vastly different media environments (see Figure 62). To varying degrees, Japanese games are explicitly and implicitly linked to the various other products of Japanese (pop)culture. Japanese players are located within the same space of interrelated media contents. Even if they do not actively consume other forms of pop cultural products, they are continuously and passively subjected to their influence. Stylized abstract characters originating in Japanese pop culture are for example nigh ubiquitous in Japan, as they appear on commercials, trains, or unrelated products of daily use. German players do not share this environment. They are instead actively and passively consuming different cultural products. Many of the potential barriers experienced by German players interacting with Japanese games, and the different expectations of German and Japanese players on the games they play, can arguably be attributed towards such differences in media environments.

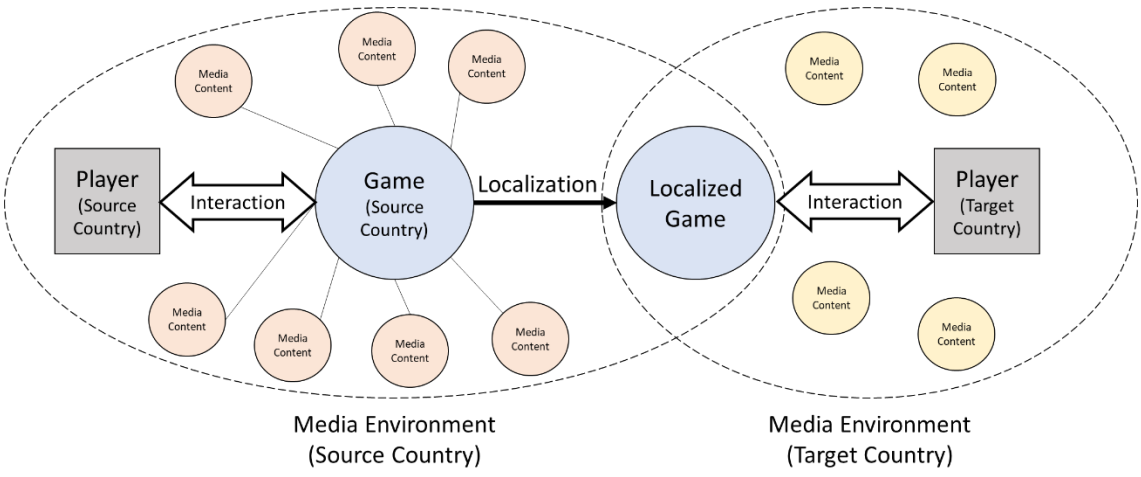

Figure 62 Relationship between games and related media content in the source country. Players in the source country are part of and aware of the broader context in which a game is embedded, while players of the localized version do not share the same media environment

Media environments are however dynamic systems, that consist of (trans)national (macro), subcultural (meso) and individual (micro) levels. It is possible to extend one's individual media environment though active consumption of content originating in another macro-level media

environment. Even if the macro-level media environments of Germany and Japan differ, German players, can actively consume media contents originating from Japan that are localized to varying degrees. The internet makes this easier and at the same time facilitates communication and exchange between individuals that extend their media environments in similar directions, leading to the formation of shared meso-level media environments across national borders. Results of this thesis show that personal media consumption patterns and the extension of the media environment towards other forms of Japanese pop culture can influence the experience of German players of Japanese games. This does not necessarily lead to a more "Japanese" experience. Instead, German players such as the reviewers of the game ToCS, or also D09, appear less critical in concern to various aspects of Japanese games (e.g. the narrative) than players in Japan, hinting at some form of overcompensation. This overcompensation can be partially interpreted as a differentiation to other German player groups (i.e. "our games are better"), and partially towards incentives to provide positive feedback on these games, to heighten the chance of more such games being released in Germany (i.e. "buy them so that we get more").

This model and understanding of media environments and the relation to German and Japanese players experience of digital games gradually crystalized during the research process and is a result of the grounded theory approach taken. It provides vantage points for further systematic qualitative studies, aimed at clarifying the relation between differing media environments, players' experiences, and current concepts of player cultures.

6 Conclusion

The overarching questions guiding this thesis and outlined in the introduction are the following: Are there differences in the experience and evaluation of games, between players from different cultural backgrounds? And if yes, of what kind are they?

Based on the qualitative analysis of 460 German and Japanese user reviews, the quantitative analysis of the overall corpus of 21.359 user reviews and the analysis of more than 207 hours of think-aloud protocols with nine German and eleven Japanese players on a sample of theoretically selected Japanese games, this thesis has shown that there are indeed differences in how German and Japanese players experience digital games and that these differences influence the patterns of game preferences across cultural borders. Such differences are related to player's internalized values and norms, their prior experiences expectations and frames of reference, narrative preferences in concern to a game's display of humor and sentimentality, the degree of realism in a game, the degree of freedom/linearity in a game, whether the player focuses on the characters or the game world, and player's aversion to repetitiveness.

Concretely, German players display a higher problem awareness of oversexualized in-game characters and the depiction of traditional family roles than Japanese players. They are also more averse towards prolonged dialogue, displaying affection between in-game characters, which was not observed among Japanese players. Japanese players make more frequent and detailed statements regarding the characters in a game, while German players appear more interested in a game's world and overall story. German players are more likely to negatively evaluate abstract, stylized art styles, perceiving them to be "childish" or "absurd", while Japanese players are more likely to dislike a photorealistic art style, calling it "bland" or "too real". Japanese players prefer a more linear game design, with clear structures that they can follow, while German players prefer an open game design with a higher degree of freedom. German players appear more averse towards repetition in a game's mechanics and overall structure, while Japanese players perceive this as less of a problem. Potentially, this can be attributed towards different degrees to which German and Japanese players separate between the real and virtual world. German players prefer an experience that more closely reflects the real world, while Japanese players appear more ready to suspend their disbelief and to strictly differentiate between the world in the game and outside of it.

These differences are in most cases however differences of degree instead of category. German players frequently exhibit characteristics commonly found among Japanese players and vice

versa. The relative distribution of game preferences arguably differs between macro-cultural regions, but more strongly in concern to preferences on a game's audio-visual and narrative shell elements than in concern to its core of rules and mechanics. The experience of a game's core is largely unrelated to the national macro-level of culture and more closely related to individual preferences and meso-level group identity. Overall, differences between Japanese and German players are less pronounced in games with a broad player base, and more salient for games with a stronger representation of meso-level subcultures.

Players' experiences of a game are shaped by their anticipated experience, that is their expectations towards them. Especially in regard to specific Japanese games, these expectations differ significantly between German and Japanese players and are related to popular discourses that attribute Japanese games with different levels of uniqueness, their "Japaneseness". German players frame this Japaneseness in positive and negative ways. For some, it is a sign of outdatedness, and a source for cultural barriers that prevent players from fully enjoying a game. For others, it provides a game with a flair of the exotic, unique and innovative. German players also frequently relate this Japaneseness with feelings of nostalgia, and in some cases attempt to learn more about Japanese society and culture through it.

Some Japanese games are depicted by German players to be "more Japanese" than others. This is partially an outcome of the concrete game design, but also caused by differing levels of commercial success and differing target groups for the games in the sample. Popular franchises such as Final Fantasy or the Legend of Zelda attract a wide range of players in Germany and Japan. Others, such as the Trails of Cold Steel series belong to the Japanese mainstream but are comparatively less well-known in Germany. The latter attract more homogenous groups of players that experience and evaluate such games in a significantly different way than either the German mainstream or most Japanese players. Again, this highlights the central role of meso-level player groups and cultures in the examination of player experience.

The results confirm some assumptions presented in prior research, such as a greater character attachment (Ngai 2005) and stronger overall influence of narrative elements on overall game evaluation (Zagal and Tomuro 2013) among Japanese players. They also provide some evidence to the notion that Japanese players are more likely to suffer from motion sickness during play (Carlson and Corliss 2011). Other assumptions appear contrary to the results of this study, such as Tsang and Prendergast's (2009) argument that reviewers from a more collectivistic culture evaluate games more positively than players from a more individualistic

culture. Overall, the results of this thesis clarify how culture extends into virtual worlds and how it affects player-game interaction and players' experiences of a game. This shows the necessity to account for different levels of player culture within research on player-game interaction, that affect the experience of different game elements in specific ways.

The contributions of this thesis to the current body of knowledge on digital games, players, and the cultures surrounding them lie in the concrete results outlined above, that clarify how culture affects players' experience of games, but also in the theoretical framework developed to attain them. The theoretical framework and methodology, developed as a part of this thesis, is an attempt to contribute towards the overall development of game studies. Game studies are currently experiencing a shift of attention towards the regional level. This "enriches the field with new perspectives drawn from regional cultural contexts" (Liboriussen and Martin 2016) from outside North America or Europe. Such perspectives are necessary to make game studies more relevant within the global political and societal debates on games. The shift towards regional game studies must however be accompanied by a shift towards comparative game studies across these regions. In this aspect, game studies have for example fallen behind comparative audience research within media studies (Stehling et al. 2016) or communication studies (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017).

With their framework for comparative research on game cultures, Elmezeny and Wimmer (2018) have provided a valuable first step towards the development of comparative game studies. This thesis combines their model of transnational game cultures with the analytical concept of player experience and broader research on player-game interaction (e.g. Calleja 2011) into an analytical and methodological framework that accounts for multiple levels of culture surrounding players and games, is highly flexible, as it can be used across different regional, sub-regional or transregional cultures, and scalable, as it is possible to adjust the concrete weight between qualitative and quantitative analysis and between the analysis of user reviews and TAPs, based on the concrete resource constraints.

The methods developed for and employed in this thesis, can be used to examine other constellations of player cultures, be it on the (national) macro-level or below. The code system that emerged during data analysis and the dictionary based upon it constitute an empirically grounded model of player experience that can form the basis for further quantitative comparisons across differing levels of culture. Such comparisons are necessary to validate the results of this study and to further develop the conceptional and methodological tools necessary

to enable valid and analytically useful comparisons across the different level of cultures surrounding games and players. As detailed in this thesis, the outlined framework and methodology can also prove of use to media and communication scholars, interested in cross-cultural analysis of the interaction with new media.

The need for further comparative research across sub- or transnational meso-level cultures will continue to grow. With the trend towards technological, content, and market convergence in the games industry and beyond (Ip 2008), the relevance of regional and linguistic boundaries will diminish. Entertainment platforms such as YouTube or Netflix are pioneering new forms of content creation and distribution that create new forms of audiences and new cultures surrounding them (Cunningham and Craig 2016; Lobato 2019). Although digital games and players are still divided between platforms and by regional availability, the borders between consoles, PCs and mobile devices are becoming porous. More and more games are released across different platforms, and first forays into cloud gaming, such as Google's Stadia, herald greater shifts in the long term. At the same time, the advances in machine translations make it easier than ever before to communicate across linguistic boundaries and have the potential to reduce the costs of localizing games. In such an environment, the influence of macro-level cultures, that this thesis argues are often already of comparatively less consequence towards the formation of players' experiences than their sub-cultural identity and individual preferences, will further weaken.

Research on digital games, their players and surrounding cultures must adapt to these changes. Further comparative analyses across different levels of game and player cultures, such as demonstrated in this thesis, can contribute, by providing systematic insights into the dynamics and patterns of meaning-making, that are at the core of game and player cultures. Digital games and their players are at the forefront of the digital revolution, as they pioneer new forms of transnational communities and communicative practices (Chatfield 2011; McGonigal 2011). Through the theoretical, methodological and empirical contribution in comparatively examining player and game cultures and player experiences across the micro-, meso- and macro-level, this thesis hopes to contribute towards a formation of comparative game studies, that facilitate and systemize the transregional academic research on games, in a necessary step to effectively contribute towards the debates that shape these ongoing changes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

A-1 Code Coverage for User Reviews

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
positive	25,2%	23,1%	24,6%
negative	15,7%	22,3%	17,6%
Meta/Context			
Comparisons			
Comparison – Predecessor	5,5%	7,8%	6,2%
Comparison – Japanese Game			
Comparison – Final Fantasy	0,7%	0,1%	0,6%
Comparison – Dragon Quest	0,0%	0,5%	0,2%
Comparison – Tales of	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Comparison – Soulsborne	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%
Comparison – Zelda	0,4%	0,1%	0,3%
Comparison – Persona	0,2%		0,1%
Comparison – Resident Evil	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Comparison – NiOH	0,2%	0,0%	0,1%
Comparison – Shin Megami Tensei		0,1%	0,0%
Comparison – Seiken Densetsu		0,1%	0,0%
Comparison – Tenchu	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Kingdom Hearts	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Comparison – Trails of Cold Steel	0,2%		0,2%
Comparison – Bayonetta	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Xenoblade	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Star Ocean	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Monster Hunter World	0,2%		0,1%
Comparison – Metal Gear Solid V		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Super Mario		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Astral Chain		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Pokemon	0,2%		0,1%
Comparison – Dragon’s Dogma	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Breath of Fire	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Shenmue	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Left Alive		0,0%	0,0%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Comparison – Last Remnant		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Drakengard		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Valkyria Chronicles		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Nier		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Ar Tonelico		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Devil May Cry	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Dark Chronicle		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Lunar	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Grandia	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Tokimeki Memorial		0,1%	0,0%
Comparison – Devil Summoner		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Chrono Trigger	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Trials of Mana		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Grandia	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Western Game			
Comparison – The Witcher	0,3%	0,0%	0,2%
Comparison – GTA	0,4%		0,3%
Comparison – Assasin's Creed	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Comparison – Skyrim	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Dragon Age	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Skyrim	0,1%	0,0%	0,1%
Comparison – Horizon: Zero Dawn	0,3%		0,2%
Comparison – Red Dead Redemption 2	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – The Last of Us	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Detroit: Become Human	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Drakensang	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Tomb Raider	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Uncharted	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Watch Dogs	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Spider Man		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Until Dawn	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Mass Effect	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – LA Noire	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – God of War	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Alone in the Dark		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – The Last of Us		0,0%	0,0%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Comparison – Edith Finch	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Gears of War	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Other Media			
Comparison – Anime	0,1%	0,3%	0,2%
Comparison – Western movies	0,2%		0,2%
Comparison – Western TV series	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Disney Movies	0,1%		0,0%
Comparison – Ghibli Movie	0,2%	0,0%	0,2%
Comparison – Fairytale	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Light Novel		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Manga		0,1%	0,0%
Comparison – Japanese TV series		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Horror Movies	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Types of Games			
Comparison – RPGs (general)	0,2%	0,1%	0,1%
Comparison – Mobile Games		0,1%	0,0%
Comparison – Other JRPGs	0,1%		0,1%
Comparison – Shooter	0,0%		0,0%
Comparison – Old games		0,0%	0,0%
Comparison – Other Developer	0,0%		0,0%
Chinese Game			
Comparison – Little Fighters	0,1%		0,0%
Meta			
Polish/Attention to Details	1,6%	1,2%	1,5%
Developer	1,2%	1,2%	1,2%
Ludo-Narrative	1,1%	1,1%	1,1%
Nostalgia/Classics	1,0%	0,4%	0,8%
Critical Acclaim/Commerical Success	0,3%	0,3%	0,3%
Innovative/Creative	0,6%	0,2%	0,5%
Platform	0,7%	0,6%	0,7%
DLC	0,8%	0,3%	0,6%
Price	0,6%	0,1%	0,5%
Gameness	0,1%	0,6%	0,3%
Games as a Medium	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
Retro/Outdated	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Case and Paraphernalia	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Game Title		0,1%	0,0%
Contextualizing Review			
Self description			
Fan of the Series/Franchise	0,6%	0,5%	0,6%
Entry to Series/Franchise	1,2%	0,4%	1,0%
Back-to-Games		1,6%	0,5%
Age	0,1%	0,0%	0,1%
Casual/Normal/Non-Hardcore Gamer	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Entry to Japanese Games	0,2%		0,2%
Preferences	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Fan of Japanese games	0,1%		0,1%
Making time for games		0,2%	0,0%
Hardcore Gamer	0,0%	0,1%	0,0%
Sex	0,0%		0,0%
Playtime	1,0%	0,3%	0,8%
Expectations	0,5%	0,3%	0,5%
Purchase reason	0,2%	0,3%	0,2%
Reason for review	0,1%	0,2%	0,1%
Evaluation/Paratext			
Locating Audience	1,4%	1,3%	1,4%
Branding	1,1%	2,0%	1,3%
Purchase Recommendation	0,8%	0,1%	0,6%
Japan/West			
Japaneseness			
Game as Japanese Game	1,2%	0,5%	1,0%
Japanese Contents	1,5%	0,2%	1,1%
Japanese Mechanics	0,6%	0,0%	0,4%
Japanese Setting	0,4%	0,1%	0,3%
Japanese Art Style	0,5%	0,4%	0,4%
Localization			
Localization (234resent)	0,1%		0,1%
Quality of Translation	0,2%		0,2%
Language			
No German	1,8%		1,2%
Options	0,6%	0,1%	0,5%
Japanese vs. Western Games and Players	0,3%	0,5%	0,4%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Game Genre			
Genre – RPG	0,4%	0,5%	0,4%
Genre – JRPG	0,5%	0,1%	0,4%
Genre – ARPG	0,2%	0,1%	0,2%
Genre – Action Game		0,1%	0,0%
Genre – Adventure	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Genre – Arcade Shooter	0,2%		0,2%
Genre – Survival Horror	0,2%	0,0%	0,2%
Genre – Gyaruge		0,2%	0,1%
Genre – Action-Adventure	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Genre – Brawler	0,1%		0,1%
Genre – Sidescroller	0,2%		0,1%
Genre – Anime Game	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Genre – Movie Game		0,0%	0,0%
Genre – Open World Game	0,0%		0,0%
Genre – Detective Game	0,0%		0,0%
Genre – Visual Novel	0,0%		0,0%
Experience Description			
Immersion/Flow	1,2%	1,2%	1,2%
Fun	0,2%	0,5%	0,3%
Evokes Real Emotion	0,6%	0,1%	0,5%
Sense of Accomplishment	0,1%	0,2%	0,1%
CVS		0,0%	0,0%
Inter- Transmedia			
Connection to Predecessors	0,8%	0,9%	0,8%
Trans-Media	0,3%	0,4%	0,3%
Use of Paratext		0,1%	0,0%
Easteregg	0,1%		0,0%
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics			
Gameplay			
Combat System			
Combat System – Overall	5,8%	4,1%	5,3%
Combat System – Moves/Skills/Combos	0,9%	0,5%	0,8%
Combat System – Depth	0,5%	0,5%	0,5%
Combat System – Strategy Explanation	0,4%	1,1%	0,6%
Combat System – Accessibility	0,3%	0,4%	0,4%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Combat System – Pacing	0,6%	0,0%	0,5%
Combat System – Modality	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%
Combat System – Items/Equipment/Loot	0,3%	0,3%	0,3%
Combat System – Battle Frequency	0,1%	0,2%	0,1%
Combat System – Party AI	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Balance/Difficulty			
Difficulty	2,3%	2,0%	2,2%
Balance	0,6%	0,5%	0,6%
Difficulty Settings	0,5%	0,3%	0,4%
Minigames/Subsystems			
Minigame/Subsystem	2,5%	2,0%	2,4%
Social Simulation	1,0%	1,4%	1,1%
Crafting	0,4%	0,1%	0,3%
Gameplay – Overall	3,3%	1,2%	2,6%
Quests			
Side Quests	1,1%	0,2%	0,9%
Main Quest	0,3%	0,1%	0,2%
Controls	0,9%	1,4%	1,0%
Characters/Party/NPC			
Customization	0,4%	0,3%	0,4%
Party Management	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
NPCs	0,0%	0,1%	0,1%
Party Interactions	0,1%		0,0%
Enemies/Monsters			
Enemies/Monsters	0,2%	0,4%	0,3%
Bosses	0,9%	0,3%	0,7%
Levelling/Progression	1,7%	0,4%	1,3%
Quality of Life			
Quality of Life (General)	0,0%	0,8%	0,2%
Fast-Travel	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%
Saving	0,0%	0,1%	0,0%
Accessability	0,4%	0,5%	0,4%
Exploration	0,5%	0,3%	0,4%
Camera	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%
UI	0,2%	0,7%	0,3%
Mounts/Vehicles	0,3%	0,1%	0,2%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Currency Management/In-Game Economy	0,2%	0,3%	0,2%
Puzzle Solving	0,1%	0,2%	0,2%
Play Modes	0,2%		0,1%
Tutorial	0,0%	0,1%	0,1%
Structure			
Length/Volume			
Length	1,9%	0,9%	1,6%
Volume	0,9%	0,4%	0,8%
Retention/Replayability/Endgame			
Retention/Keeping Motivation	0,5%	0,9%	0,6%
Replayability	0,7%	0,3%	0,6%
Play After Main Story	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
Multiple Endings	0,3%	0,0%	0,2%
World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons			
World			
Dungeons	1,4%	1,1%	1,3%
Overworldmap	0,2%	0,1%	0,2%
Levels/Locations	0,5%	0,3%	0,4%
Size	0,7%	0,3%	0,6%
Level of Detail	0,4%	0,2%	0,4%
Traversing the World	0,1%	0,6%	0,3%
Interactivity	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
Weather/Night-Day Cycles	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Openness/Linearity			
Open World	1,1%	1,0%	1,1%
Freedom/Linearity	1,5%	0,7%	1,3%
Pacing/Repetition/Changes			
Pacing	1,7%	0,8%	1,4%
Gameplay Changes	1,0%	0,0%	0,7%
Repetetive	0,4%	0,1%	0,3%
Play vs. Talk	1,1%	0,3%	0,8%
Story/Narrative			
Story			
Story (General)	4,4%	6,9%	5,1%
Presentation/Logic/Accessibility			
Presentation	1,9%	3,3%	2,3%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Accessability	0,5%	0,8%	0,6%
Logic	0,3%	1,4%	0,6%
Emotionality	0,8%	0,7%	0,8%
Plot/Storylines	0,6%	0,9%	0,7%
Predictability/Twists	0,8%	0,4%	0,7%
Complexety	0,9%	0,1%	0,6%
Ending	0,1%	0,6%	0,3%
Scope	0,3%	0,1%	0,3%
Characters			
Characters (General)	4,0%	3,8%	3,9%
Protagonist(s)	0,7%	0,9%	0,8%
Characterization/Personality/Motivation/Background	1,0%	0,7%	0,9%
Dialogue	0,5%	0,5%	0,5%
Character Development	0,5%	0,4%	0,5%
Antagonist(s)		0,1%	0,0%
Background/Lore/Worldbuilding			
Worldbuilding	1,6%	3,3%	2,1%
Topics	0,5%	1,3%	0,7%
Setting	0,1%	1,1%	0,4%
Audio/Visual			
Visual			
Visual (general)	1,1%	0,4%	0,9%
Art style	2,1%	1,0%	1,8%
Characters	0,4%	0,5%	0,4%
World	0,9%	0,2%	0,7%
UI	0,3%	1,1%	0,5%
Cutscenes	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%
Sensory Overload	0,1%	0,2%	0,1%
Combat animations	0,0%	0,1%	0,0%
Audio			
Music	2,2%	1,1%	1,9%
Voice Acting	0,8%	0,4%	0,7%
Sound effects/soundscape	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
Technology			
Technology – Graphic	0,5%	0,9%	0,7%

Code System	Germany	Japan	TOTAL
Loading Time	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%
Technology (General)	0,2%	0,1%	0,2%
Bugs	0,0%	0,4%	0,2%
NOT CODED	37,5%	42,0%	38,8%
CODED	62,5%	58,0%	61,2%
WHOLE TEXT	100,0% (359.041)	100,0% (150.066)	100,0% (509.107)

A-2 Frequency of Codes

Category/Code	Frequency
positive	1058
negative	635
Meta/Context	0
Comparisons	0
Comparison – Predecessor	262
Comparison – Japanese Game	0
Comparison – Final Fantasy	27
Comparison – Dragon Quest	12
Comparison – Tales of	10
Comparison – Soulsborne	10
Comparison – Zelda	6
Comparison – Persona	5
Comparison – Resident Evil	3
Comparison – NiOH	3
Comparison – Shin Megami Tensei	3
Comparison – Seiken Densetsu	2
Comparison – Tenchu	2
Comparison – Kingdom Hearts	2
Comparison – Trails of Cold Steel	2
Comparison – Bayonetta	2
Comparison – Xenoblade	2
Comparison – Star Ocean	2
Comparison – Monster Hunter World	1
Comparison – Metal Gear Solid V	1
Comparison – Super Mario	1
Comparison – Astral Chain	1
Comparison – Pokemon	1
Comparison – Dragon‘s Dogma	1
Comparison – Breath of Fire	1
Comparison – Shenmue	1
Comparison – Left Alive	1
Comparison – Last Remnant	1
Comparison – Drakengard	1
Comparison – Valkyria Chronicles	1

Category/Code	Frequency
Comparison – Nier	1
Comparison – Ar Tonelico	1
Comparison – Devil May Cry	1
Comparison – Dark Chronicle	1
Comparison – Lunar	1
Comparison – Grandia	1
Comparison – Tokimeki Memorial	1
Comparison – Devil Summoner	1
Comparison – Chrono Trigger	1
Comparison – Trials of Mana	1
Comparison – Grandia	2
Comparison – Western Game	0
Comparison – The Witcher	9
Comparison – GTA	5
Comparison – Assasin‘s Creed	4
Comparison – Skyrim	3
Comparison – Dragon Age	3
Comparison – Skyrim	3
Comparison – Horizon: Zero Dawn	3
Comparison – Red Dead Redemption 2	2
Comparison – The Last of Us	2
Comparison – Detroit: Become Human	2
Comparison – Drakensang	2
Comparison – Tomb Raider	1
Comparison – Uncharted	1
Comparison – Watch Dogs	1
Comparison – Spider Man	1
Comparison – Until Dawn	1
Comparison – Mass Effect	1
Comparison – LA Noire	1
Comparison – God of War	1
Comparison – Alone in the Dark	1
Comparison – The Last of Us	1
Comparison – Edith Finch	1
Comparison – Gears of War	1
Comparison – Other Media	0

Category/Code	Frequency
Comparison – Anime	10
Comparison – Western movies	3
Comparison – Western TV series	3
Comparison – Disney Movies	3
Comparison – Ghibli Movie	4
Comparison – Fairytale	2
Comparison – Light Novel	2
Comparison – Manga	1
Comparison – Japanese TV series	1
Comparison – Horror Movies	1
Comparison – Types of Games	0
Comparison – RPGs (general)	9
Comparison – Mobile Games	2
Comparison – Other JRPGs	1
Comparison – Shooter	1
Comparison – Old games	1
Comparison – Other Developer	1
Chinese Game	0
Comparison – Little Fighters	1
Meta	0
Polish/Attention to Details	62
Developer	59
Ludo-Narrative	39
Nostalgia/Classics	38
Critical Acclaim/Commerical Success	24
Innovative/Creative	21
Platform	18
DLC	17
Price	17
Gameness	14
Games as a Medium	5
Retro/Outdated	3
Case and Paraphernalia	2
Game Title	2
Contextualizing Review	0
Self Description	0

Category/Code	Frequency
Fan of the Series/Franchise	40
Entry to Series/Franchise	32
Back-to-Games	8
Age	7
Casual/Normal/Non-Hardcore Gamer	5
Entry to Japanese Games	4
Preferences	5
Fan of Japanese Games	3
Making Time for Games	3
Hardcore Gamer	2
Sex	1
Playtime	57
Expectations	26
Purchase reason	17
Reason for Review	7
Evaluation/Paratext	0
Locating Audience	83
Branding	61
Purchase Recommendation	32
Japan/West	0
Japaneseness	0
Game as Japanese Game	41
Japanese Contents	32
Japanese Mechanics	9
Japanese Setting	8
Japanese Art Style	17
Localization	0
Localization (Genral)	4
Quality of Translation	3
Language	0
No German	28
Options	10
Japanese vs. Western Games and Players	22
Game Genre	0
Genre – RPG	43
Genre – JRPG	28

Category/Code	Frequency
Genre – ARPG	12
Genre – Action Game	6
Genre – Adventure	6
Genre – Arcade Shooter	4
Genre – Survival Horror	4
Genre – Gyaruge	5
Genre – Action-Adventure	3
Genre – Brawler	3
Genre – Sidescroller	2
Genre – Anime Game	2
Genre – Movie Game	1
Genre – Open World Game	1
Genre – Detective Game	1
Genre – Visual Novel	1
Experience Description	0
Immersion/Flow	56
Fun	26
Evokes Real Emotion	19
Sense of Accomplishment	6
CVS	2
Inter- Transmedia	0
Connection to Predecessors	17
Trans-Media	15
Use of Paratext	4
Easteregg	2
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics	0
Gameplay	0
Combat System	0
Combat System – Overall	196
Combat System – Moves/Skills/Combos	31
Combat System – Depth	26
Combat System – Strategy Explanation	21
Combat System – Accessibility	23
Combat System – Pacing	16
Combat System – Modality	16
Combat System – Items/Equipment/Loot	14

Category/Code	Frequency
Combat System – Battle Frequency	4
Combat System – Party AI	2
Balance/Difficulty	0
Difficulty	113
Balance	18
Difficulty Settings	15
Minigames/Subsystems	0
Minigame/Subsystem	70
Social Simulation	37
Crafting	14
Gameplay – Overall	88
Quests	0
Side Quests	43
Main Quest	13
Controls	49
Characters/Party/NPC	0
Customization	26
Party Management	7
NPCs	6
Party Interactions	4
Enemies/Monsters	0
Enemies/Monsters	20
Bosses	20
Levelling/Progression	37
Quality of Life	0
Quality of Life (General)	17
Fast-Travel	13
Saving	4
Accessability	30
Exploration	19
Camera	18
UI	14
Mounts/Vehicles	11
Currency Management/In-Game Economy	8
Puzzle Solving	7
Play Modes	6

Category/Code	Frequency
Tutorial	3
Structure	0
Length/Volume	0
Length	60
Volume	32
Retention/Replayability/Endgame	0
Retention/Keeping Motivation	44
Replayability	19
Play After Main Story	11
Multiple Endings	7
World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons	0
World	0
Dungeons	40
Overworldmap	7
Levels/Locations	19
Size	30
Level of Detail	15
Traversing the World	11
Interactivity	5
Weather/Night-Day Cycles	4
Openness/Linearity	0
Open World	52
Freedom/Linearity	39
Pacing/Repetition/Changes	0
Pacing	44
Gameplay Changes	17
Repetetive	12
Play vs. Talk	24
Story/Narrative	0
Story	0
Story (General)	259
Presentation/Logic/Accessibility	0
Presentation	73
Accessability	22
Logic	18
Emotionality	33

Category/Code	Frequency
Plot/Storylines	33
Predictability/Twists	28
Complexety	16
Ending	15
Scope	9
Characters	0
Characters (General)	149
Protagonist(s)	38
Characterization/Personality/Motivation/Background	26
Dialogue	31
Character Development	14
Antagonist(s)	6
Background/Lore/Worldbuilding	0
Worldbuilding	62
Topics	29
Setting	15
Audio/Visual	0
Visual	0
Visual (general)	79
Art style	71
Characters	38
World	36
UI	21
Cutscenes	20
Sensory Overload	4
Combat animations	4
Audio	0
Music	97
Voice Acting	32
Sound effects/soundscape	16
Technology	0
Technology – Graphic	44
Loading Time	13
Technology (General)	12
Bugs	11

A-3 Codes with Descriptive Memos

Code	Memo
Positive	Positive impressions, experiences, evaluations or opinions. Refers to the overall sentiment of comments.
Negative	Negative impressions, experiences, evaluations, or opinions. Refers to the overall sentiment of comments.
Meta/Context	Top-level category for all comments made in concern to external factors of the game.
Meta/Context\Comparisons	Comparisons to other games, franchises or media.
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Predecessor	Game is compared to its predecessors or other games by the same developer.
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Japanese Game	Game is compared to games developed by Japanese developers.
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Western Game	Game is compared to Western games.
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Other Media	Game is compared to other forms of media, e.g. movies.
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Types of Games	Game is compared to other types of games on a general level, e.g. to RPGs in general, or to "Western games".
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Comparison – Types of Games\Comparison – RPGs (general)	Game itself not perceived as RPG...
Meta/Context\Comparisons\Chinese Game	Comparison to Chinese games.
Meta/Context\Meta	Comments on the context or meta-level of a game. Includes comments made in concern to a game's developer(s) or publisher(s) business practices, the overall status of games as a media, their links to other media and the way they are played in general.
Meta/Context\Meta\Polish/Attention to Details	Comments in relation to the overall polish of the game or the attention to details within it. Comments that are conceptionally close to ideas of craftsmanship.
Meta/Context\Meta\Developer	Comments in concern to the game's developer(s) or publisher(s).
Meta/Context\Meta\Ludo-Narrative	Comments in concern to the relationship between a game's story and mechanics. Includes comments to the effect of ludo-narrative dissonances or convergences. It does not include specific mentions in concern to the allocation of "play time" vs. "talk time", this is attributed as a structural code within the gameplay category.

Code	Memo
Meta/Context\Meta\Nostalgia/Classics	Comments related to feelings of nostalgia or references to "classical", "old-school" or "good old" games.
Meta/Context\Meta\Critical Acclaim/Commerical Success	Mention of the general critical acclaim or commercial success of a game, also includes attributions of games as a masterpiece and parts of broader game canon.
Meta/Context\Meta\Innovative/Creative	Comments on a game's overall innovativeness or creativity.
Meta/Context\Meta\Platform	Comments on the game's platform (hardware) or storage medium (e.g. disc vs. card). Does not include the game's jacket, etc.
Meta/Context\Meta\DLC	Comments on downloadable content.
Meta/Context\Meta\Price	Comments on the price of a game or its pricing policy.
Meta/Context\Meta\Gameness	Remarks on what poses the "core" of a game or what makes it a "game", e.g. "as a game...".
Meta/Context\Meta\Games as a Medium	Comments on the state of games as a medium, within broader media ecology and the state of the games industry.
Meta/Context\Meta\Retro/Outdated	Describing a game as out of date, old or retro in a bad context. Differentiated from Nostalgia/Classics by its focus on negative aspects evaluation of the game as being not up to date.
Meta/Context\Meta\Case and Paraphernalia	Mention of the game's package, including case, handbook limited edition content, etc.
Meta/Context\Meta\Game Title	Remarks made on the title of a game.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review	Contextual information on the review or reviewer.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self Description	Self-discriptions of a reviews author.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Fan of the Series/Franchise	Reviewer professes to be a fan of the series, franchise or prior games of the same developer.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Entry to Series/Franchise	Reviewer professes to the game to be the first game played in the series/franchise.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Back-to-Games	Reviewer professes the game to be their first game after a long time without having played games (usually several years).
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Age	Age of reviewer.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Casual/Normal/Non-Hardcore Gamer	Reviewers describe themselves as non-hardcore gamers, casual gamers or "normal" gamers.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Entry to Japanese Games	Reviewer is new to Japanese games.

Code	Memo
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Preferences	Reviewer describes their general preferences in games, e.g. in concern to genre or gameplay.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Fan of Japanese Games	Reviewer professes to be a fan of Japanese games.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Making Time for Games	Information on when/how reviewers make time to play.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Hardcore Gamer	Reviewer explicitly identifies as a hardcore gamer.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Self description\Sex	Sex of the reviewer.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Playtime	Descriptions on how long the game was played at the point of writing the review.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Expectations	Expectations of the game before playing.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Purchase Reason	Reason for purchasing the game.
Meta/Context\Contextualizing Review\Reason for Review	Reason for writing the review.
Meta/Context\Evaluation/Paratext	Comments directed at other players, or the larger games community.
Meta/Context\Evaluation/Paratext\Locating Audience	Recommendation on which type of player will enjoy the game. E.g. “the game is for people who...”.
Meta/Context\Evaluation/Paratext\Branding	Discourse on what constitutes the core of a game series, what belongs to it and what not. E.g. “a game without turn-based combat system is no real FF”.
Meta/Context\Evaluation/Paratext\Purchase Recommendation	Wether the reviewer can recommend the purchase of the game or not.
Meta/Context\Japan/West	On the “Japan-West” divide.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness	Comments related to the “Japaneseness” of game.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness\Game as Japanese Game	Comments made to the Japanese origin of the game.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness\Japanese Contents	Comments made on the “Japaneseness” of a game’s contents. E.g.: Japanese humor, bizarreness, barriers for Western users, etc.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness\Japanese Mechanics	Mentions of “unique” Japanese game mechanics.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness\Japanese Setting	Virtual vacation. The Japanese setting as a way to experience Japan.

Code	Memo
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japaneseness\Japanese Art Style	Comments, framing a game's art style as "Japanese".
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Localization	Comments on the localization of a game.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Localization\Localization (251resent)	On the game's localization in general.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Localization\Language\No German	Comments on missing German sub or dub.
Meta/Context\Japan/West\Japanese vs. Western Games and Players	Remarks that compare Japanese and Western games, audiences or industries.
Meta/Context\Game Genre	Comments that discuss the genre of the game, link its mechanics to specific game genres or describe the genre from the perspective of the reviewer.
Meta/Context\Experience Description	Descriptions of player's experiences, such as flow or immersion.
Meta/Context\Experience Description\Immersion/Flow	Comments on the state of immersion into the game world or reaching a flow state, marked by descriptions such as "I completely forgot the time", etc.
Meta/Context\Experience Description\Fun	Descriptions of general "fun" attained from a game.
Meta/Context\Experience Description\Evokes Real Emotion	Game evokes real emotion in the player
Meta/Context\Experience Description\Sense of Accomplishment	Reviewer describes a sense of accomplishment
Meta/Context\Experience Description\CVS	Mentions of computer vision syndrome or general nausea etc.
Meta/Context\Inter- Transmedia	Relation of game to other media.
Meta/Context\Inter- Transmedia\Connection to Predecessors	Discussion on the relation of the game to prior entries in a series or by a developer.
Meta/Context\Inter- Transmedia\Trans-Media	Mentions of related media products, e.g. Manga, anime, etc.
Meta/Context\Inter- Transmedia\Use of Paratext	Mention of strategy sites, watching playthroughs, etc.
Meta/Context\Inter- Transmedia\Easteregg	Mention of eastereggs in the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics	Top-Category for gameplay, rules and mechanics.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay	On the game's mechanics/gameplay.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System	On the combat system.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Overall	General mention of the combat system.

Code	Memo
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Moves/Skills/Combos	Comments on possible moves, skills, or combos in the game's combat.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Depth	Complexity or depth of combat.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Strategy Explanation	Explanation/guide of strategy used in combat.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Accessibility	How easy it is to get used to/master the combat system.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Pacing	On the pacing/speed of combat.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Modality	On the combat system's mode, i.e. real time or turn based; lock-on mechanism, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Items/Equipment/Loot	On loot (items dropped by enemies), general equipment and items in the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Battle Frequency	Frequency of battles, including random encounters.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Combat System\Combat System – Party AI	Comments made in concern to AI of companions, party members, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Balance/Difficulty	On balance and difficulty of a game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Balance/Difficulty\Difficulty	Comments made in concern to the difficulty of the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Balance/Difficulty\Balance	Comments made pertaining to the balancing of a game, differentiated from difficulty by explicit mention of the balancing aspect.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Balance/Difficulty\Difficulty Settings	Comments that pertain to the possibility of changing difficulty settings.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Minigames/Subsystems	On subsystems in the game, usually referred to as "minigames"
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Minigames/Subsystems\Minigame/Subsystem	On subsystems or minigames within the games.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Minigames/Subsystems\Social Simulation	Subsystems or minigames that simulate social interaction, e.g. developing friendships or pursuing romances.

Code	Memo
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Minigames/Subsystems\Crafting	On crafting of weapons or items.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Gameplay – Overall	Comments on gameplay in general, not sorted into other categories.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quests	Comments made on quests within the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quests\Side Quests	Comments on side quests, or side missions.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quests\Main Quest	Comments related to main questline of a game, differentiated from story categories by a focus on their rules and mechanics.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Controls	Comments on a game's controls, including button mapping, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Characters/Party/NPC	Comments on the game's characters from the perspective of gameplay.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Characters/Party/NPC\Customization	On options to customize your characters, e.g.: character generators, equipment, skills/roles/classes/jobs, cosmetics, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Characters/Party/NPC\Party Management	On party management, e.g. equipment, roles, behavior settings etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Characters/Party/NPC\NPCs	On behavior, relationship with and importance of NPCs.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Characters/Party/NPC\Party Interactions	Interactions within the party, e.g. events to deepen relationships, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Enemies/Monsters	On the game's adversaries from the viewpoint of gameplay.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Enemies/Monsters\Enemies/Monsters	On the behavior, types, number, frequency or strength of enemies.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Enemies/Monsters\Bosses	On bosses or boss battles.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Levelling/Progression	On the way progress is made in the game, e.g. levelling, skill dependent, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quality of Life	On quality of life features in a game, also related to usability.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quality of Life\Quality of Life (General)	On general quality of life functions, e.g. ease of picking up loot, ability to skip conversations or cutscenes, ease and functionality of map, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quality of Life\Fast-Travel	On fast-travel availability and convenience

Code	Memo
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Quality of Life\Saving	On the way the game can be saved, e.g. with save points, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Accessibility	On accessibility of the gameplay, also includes accessibility of combat system.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Exploration	On exploring the game world.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Camera	On the way the camera perspective and how it is moved, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\UI	On the game's user interface (currently double with visual/UI).
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Mounts/Vehicles	On mounts/vehicles available in the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Currency Management/In-Game Economy	On in-game economy and the use of currencies.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Puzzle Solving	On puzzles in the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Play Modes	On different play modes, e.g. multiplayer, etc.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Gameplay\Tutorial	On the game's tutorial.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure	On the structure of gameplay, that is the rules imposed on the player and the boundaries for interaction.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Length/Volume	On length or volume of a game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Length/Volume\Length	On the length of a game, for example the time it takes for a playthrough.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Length/Volume\Volume	On the volume of a game, differentiated from length by a focus on the amount of content available.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Retention/Replayability/Endgame	On retention, replayability or the endgame.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Retention/Replayability/Endgame\Retention/Keeping Motivation	On motivation of player to continue game, esp. long-time motivation.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Retention/Replayability/Endgame\Replayability	Replayability of a game, including mechanics such as new game plus but also general replayability. Different endings are accounted for in a different code.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Retention/Replayability/Endgame\Play After Main Story	On possibility and motivation to continue playing after finishing main story, but not starting a new game.

Code	Memo
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Retention/Replayability/Endgame\Multiple Endings	On different endings of the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons	Non-audio/visual aspects of Game World (level-design, etc.)
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\World	On the game's world in terms of gameplay.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\World\Dungeons	On dungeons in the game (or the lack thereof).
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\World\Overworld map	On the overworldmap.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\World\Levels/Locations	On the game's levels and general locations, aside from those specified as "dungeons".
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\Size	On the size of the world, maps or dungeons.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\Level of Detail	On the level of detail on the maps/locations/dungeons.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\Traversing the World	On the way/freedom/problems of traversing the world, based on its affordances.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\Interactivity	On interaction between player and game world.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\World/Levels/Maps/Dungeons\Weather/Night-Day Cycles	On changes on the maps, through weather or day-night cycles.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Openness/Linearity	On openness/linearity within the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Openness/Linearity\Open World	On the openness of the game world, especially in concern to the concept of an "open world".
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Openness/Linearity\Freedom/Linearity	On the freedom attributed the player within the game, between linearity and freedom.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Pacing/Repetition/Changes	On the dynamics of the game, its pacing and repetition.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Pacing/Repetition/Changes\Pacing	On the game's pacing.

Code	Memo
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Pacing/Repetition/Changes\Gameplay Changes	On changes of gameplay or the way the game is played during the game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Pacing/Repetition/Changes\Repetetive	On repetitiveness of game.
Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics\Structure\Play vs. Talk	On the ratio of time spent actively playing and passively reading/watching the story, e.g. through cutscenes.
Story/Narrative	Comments related to a game's story
Story/Narrative\Story	On story/narrative elements.
Story/Narrative\Story\Story (General)	Remarks made on the story in general.
Story/Narrative\Story\Presentation/Logic/Accessibility	On the Presentation, accessibility, and logic of the game's story.
Story/Narrative\Story\Presentation/Logic/Accessibility\Presentation	On the way the story is presented in the game.
Story/Narrative\Story\Presentation/Logic/Accessibility\Accessibility	On the accessibility of the story.
Story/Narrative\Story\Presentation/Logic/Accessibility\Logic	On the logical soundness of the story.
Story/Narrative\Story\Emotionality	On how the story affects the emotional state of users, includes humor. Also includes mentions of story not being memorable, as a supposed antithesis of emotionality.
Story/Narrative\Story\Plot/Storylines	On the game's plot or storylines, includes substories.
Story/Narrative\Story\Predictability/Twists	On the predictability of the story and possible twists.
Story/Narrative\Story\Complexity	Complexity and depth of story.
Story/Narrative\Story\Ending	On the game's ending.
Story/Narrative\Story\Scope	On the scope of the story.
Story/Narrative\Characters	On the game's characters in terms of their relations or place in the story or their characterization.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Characters (General)	On the game's characters on general.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Protagonist(s)	On the game's protagonists.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Characterization/Personality/Motivation/Background	On the characterization, personality, motivation, background, and general depth of characters.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Dialogue	On character's dialogue within the game, including party banter.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Character Development	On character's development over time.
Story/Narrative\Characters\Antagonist(s)	On the game's antagonist/s.

Code	Memo
Story/Narrative\Background/Lore/Worldbuilding	On the background and worldbuilding of the game world.
Story/Narrative\Background/Lore/Worldbuilding\Worldbuilding	On the game's worldbuilding, i.e. its setting, lore and background story, as well as general atmosphere.
Story/Narrative\Background/Lore/Worldbuilding\Topics	On topics discussed in the game.
Story/Narrative\Background/Lore/Worldbuilding\Setting	On the setting of the game world.
Audio/Visual	On the aesthetic elements of the game.
Audio/Visual\Visual	On the visual elements.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Visual (general)	On the game's visuals or graphic on general.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Art style	On the game's art style/design.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Characters	On the visual representation of characters.
Audio/Visual\Visual\World	On the visual representation of the game world.
Audio/Visual\Visual\UI	On the game's UI, including pop-ups, HUD, etc.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Cutscenes	On the visual dimension of cutscenes.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Sensory Overload	Description of experiencing sensory overload, e.g. through too colorful and extensive UI.
Audio/Visual\Visual\Combat animations	On the visual presentation of combat animations.
Audio/Visual\Audio	On the audio elements.
Audio/Visual\Audio\Music	On the game's music.
Audio/Visual\Audio\Voice Acting	On the existence, frequency and quality of voice acting.
Audio/Visual\Audio\Sound effects/soundscape	On sound effects and background/ambient sound
Technology\Technology – Graphic	On the technological aspects of the game's graphic, e.g. resolutions, rendering, fps, textures, etc.
Technology\Loading Time	One loading times in the game.
Technology\Technology (General)	On the technological aspects of the game in general, also includes e.g. installation time or file size comments.
Technology\Bugs	On bugs in the game.

Appendix B

B-1 Overview of user reviews in the qualitative analysis with ID used for citation in the thesis

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_001	GER_DD	Schnobrich Daniela	2019-06-04	5	6
D_Rev_002	GER_DD	Amazon Kunde	2019-01-28	5	48
D_Rev_003	GER_DD	Jonrelle	2018-12-15	1	131
D_Rev_004	GER_DD	Veteran 58	2018-02-21	5	355
D_Rev_005	GER_DD	Bungus	2018-01-03	5	841
D_Rev_006	GER_DD	Pri83max	2017-12-31	5	554
D_Rev_007	GER_DD	Süße Maus	2017-12-19	5	369
D_Rev_008	GER_DD	RPG-Zocker	2017-10-30	5	700
D_Rev_009	GER_DD	Julian	2017-10-12	5	563
D_Rev_010	GER_DD	M.Anger	2017-10-05	5	254
D_Rev_011	GER_DD	Robert Gray	2017-10-05	5	231
D_Rev_012	GER_DD	Andy90	2017-10-04	5	689
D_Rev_013	GER_DMC5	AG	2019-08-16	5	120
D_Rev_014	GER_DMC5	Stefan	2019-08-03	5	249
D_Rev_015	GER_DMC5	Nataliya Guteva	2019-07-21	5	111
D_Rev_016	GER_DMC5	Sulejman	2019-06-04	5	83
D_Rev_017	GER_DMC5	Dirk Quast	2019-05-21	5	645
D_Rev_018	GER_DMC5	Torben	2019-05-14	3	285
D_Rev_019	GER_DMC5	Rolf Friedrich	2019-05-12	5	90
D_Rev_020	GER_DMC5	Alexander Hahnl	2019-04-15	5	1178
D_Rev_021	GER_DMC5	Amazon Kunde	2019-04-08	5	42
D_Rev_022	GER_DMC5	Karin Schmitt	2019-03-16	5	635
D_Rev_023	GER_DMC5	Fiona	2019-03-12	5	126
D_Rev_024	GER_DMC5	Ola S.	2019-03-11	5	3753
D_Rev_025	GER_DMC5	Ki.Tai	2019-03-10	5	1403
D_Rev_026	GER_DMC5	Room302	2019-03-09	4	4110
D_Rev_027	GER_DMC5	Zavalar	2019-03-08	1	1943
D_Rev_028	GER_DQ11	TomKro	2019-01-16	5	1307
D_Rev_029	GER_DQ11	DT	2018-12-06	5	632
D_Rev_030	GER_DQ11	tyr4el	2018-09-15	4	1548
D_Rev_031	GER_DQ11	Andariel Draven	2018-09-08	5	48
D_Rev_032	GER_DQ11	electrofunk73	2018-09-06	5	1432
D_Rev_033	GER_DQ11	Noname	2018-09-05	5	665
D_Rev_034	GER_DQ11	Janosch	2018-09-04	3	1205
D_Rev_035	GER_FF15	Stefanie Böttcher	2018-10-22	5	14
D_Rev_036	GER_FF15	Semyl	2018-08-17	3	74
D_Rev_037	GER_FF15	Alexander Kühne	2018-06-07	5	137
D_Rev_038	GER_FF15	Amazon Kunde	2018-02-08	3	165

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_039	GER_FF15	E.	2017-05-14	5	168
D_Rev_040	GER_FF15	Ramona B.	2017-05-02	5	4129
D_Rev_041	GER_FF15	Sveninho27	2017-04-23	3	642
D_Rev_042	GER_FF15	Ryante	2017-04-08	2	826
D_Rev_043	GER_FF15	C. Möller	2017-02-22	4	2143
D_Rev_044	GER_FF15	Cabbage	2017-02-18	4	1960
D_Rev_045	GER_FF15	Daisy	2017-01-21	5	514
D_Rev_046	GER_FF15	Kristin Hofmann	2017-01-09	5	390
D_Rev_047	GER_FF15	Klaus Trophobie	2017-01-03	4	7220
D_Rev_048	GER_FF15	Kai	2016-12-20	3	9725
D_Rev_049	GER_FF15	Amazon Kunde	2016-12-19	5	649
D_Rev_050	GER_FF15	Sebastian Balkow	2016-12-19	5	174
D_Rev_051	GER_FF15	Midgard	2016-12-19	2	5172
D_Rev_052	GER_FF15	Amazon Kunde	2016-12-17	5	1256
D_Rev_053	GER_FF15	H., Jennifer	2016-12-15	5	1089
D_Rev_054	GER_FF15	Fin	2016-12-15	5	735
D_Rev_055	GER_FF15	Thomas	2016-11-30	5	632
D_Rev_056	GER_FF15	Christopher und Natalie	2016-11-29	5	202
D_Rev_057	GER_JUD	Mounty McF	2019-09-21	5	291
D_Rev_058	GER_JUD	Stefan PÃ nter	2019-09-18	5	209
D_Rev_059	GER_JUD	Patrick	2019-09-05	4	53
D_Rev_060	GER_JUD	Misa	2019-07-31	5	95
D_Rev_061	GER_JUD	Frank Kuhnke	2019-07-28	5	187
D_Rev_062	GER_JUD	felix Kühne	2019-07-15	5	2228
D_Rev_063	GER_JUD	Werner Burgstaller	2019-07-13	5	75
D_Rev_064	GER_JUD	Nathalie K.	2019-07-12	5	899
D_Rev_065	GER_JUD	Blasko	2019-07-08	5	820
D_Rev_066	GER_JUD	xxDON_ROBxx	2019-06-29	5	506
D_Rev_067	GER_KH3	Rikayne	2019-07-22	4	535
D_Rev_068	GER_KH3	Annika	2019-04-07	5	96
D_Rev_069	GER_KH3	hoola	2019-03-07	5	706
D_Rev_070	GER_KH3	Manu-Kanu	2019-02-04	5	360
D_Rev_071	GER_KH3	Andreas Weber	2019-02-01	1	142
D_Rev_072	GER_KH3	bebedora	2019-01-31	5	835
D_Rev_073	GER_KH3	Swang	2019-01-30	3	451
D_Rev_074	GER_KH3	D-O	2019-01-29	5	2240
D_Rev_075	GER_KH3	Christian Testet	2019-01-29	5	4224
D_Rev_076	GER_KH3	Andre	2019-01-29	5	1330
D_Rev_077	GER_NA	Christopher Whagen	2019-10-01	5	1609
D_Rev_078	GER_NA	Lanfear	2019-09-27	5	36
D_Rev_079	GER_NA	Kunde	2019-07-09	5	677
D_Rev_080	GER_NA	T. W.	2019-04-28	5	107

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_081	GER_NA	Zaakor	2018-12-28	5	1149
D_Rev_082	GER_NA	Robert Rose	2018-12-23	5	11309
D_Rev_083	GER_NA	Amazon Kunde	2018-12-16	5	456
D_Rev_084	GER_NA	MichaelSheepson	2018-08-24	5	618
D_Rev_085	GER_NA	Christoph Kerschbaum	2018-06-29	3	964
D_Rev_086	GER_NA	Christian Lühr	2018-01-01	2	4410
D_Rev_087	GER_NA	Oliver Kaatz	2017-09-24	5	2940
D_Rev_088	GER_NK2	Anonym	2019-04-08	5	184
D_Rev_089	GER_NK2	Fränk	2018-12-18	4	2114
D_Rev_090	GER_NK2	Helena Rissling	2018-10-17	5	400
D_Rev_091	GER_NK2	Amazon Kunde	2018-06-12	5	289
D_Rev_092	GER_NK2	DrEcon	2018-06-01	5	88
D_Rev_093	GER_NK2	Björn George	2018-04-29	2	4872
D_Rev_094	GER_NK2	Minimi	2018-04-24	5	146
D_Rev_095	GER_NK2	Kim	2018-04-11	4	1223
D_Rev_096	GER_NK2	Stefan V.	2018-04-08	4	1672
D_Rev_097	GER_NK2	xBlack AngeLx	2018-03-26	5	9338
D_Rev_098	GER_NK2	AS	2018-03-26	5	665
D_Rev_099	GER_NK2	Kottan	2018-03-25	4	2522
D_Rev_100	GER_OCT	Clyde	2019-05-25	1	170
D_Rev_101	GER_OCT	marcel hummer	2019-02-20	5	2557
D_Rev_102	GER_OCT	Dark Weaver	2019-01-13	5	231
D_Rev_103	GER_OCT	Cassious	2018-09-29	5	1692
D_Rev_104	GER_OCT	Marco	2018-08-27	5	843
D_Rev_105	GER_OCT	Rene Illitz	2018-07-13	5	192
D_Rev_106	GER_OCT	Bender A.	2018_08-12	5	535
D_Rev_107	GER_P5	Xoxoxochitl	2018-03-01	2	3527
D_Rev_108	GER_P5	Kai	2017-12-31	5	279
D_Rev_109	GER_P5	mazen sahlieh	2017-12-20	5	163
D_Rev_110	GER_P5	Metalboy	2017-12-14	5	426
D_Rev_111	GER_P5	Julian Nordhorn	2017-12-13	3	2025
D_Rev_112	GER_P5	Kyreth07	2017-12-04	3	3486
D_Rev_113	GER_P5	Ramona B.	2017-11-25	5	1704
D_Rev_114	GER_P5	Aliasjeanne	2017-11-09	5	1008
D_Rev_115	GER_P5	Kevin Jones	2017-11-03	5	483
D_Rev_116	GER_P5	Katharina	2017-11-01	5	152
D_Rev_117	GER_P5	Dietmar Werner	2017-10-29	5	271
D_Rev_118	GER_P5	Sam	2017-10-28	4	203
D_Rev_119	GER_P5	jana	2017-10-24	5	1755
D_Rev_120	GER_P5	Brienchen2401	2017-10-21	5	696
D_Rev_121	GER_P5	Alexever17	2017-09-24	5	156
D_Rev_122	GER_P5	Philipp G.	2017-09-20	5	1929

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_123	GER_P5	Daniel	2017-09-20	3	858
D_Rev_124	GER_P5	Nanabuu	2017-09-09	5	415
D_Rev_125	GER_P5	Kanye 88	2017-09-09	5	830
D_Rev_126	GER_P5	Niklas Mirrg	2017-09-06	3	1206
D_Rev_127	GER_P5	Donnie_Darko	2017-08-18	2	1331
D_Rev_128	GER_P5	telespieler	2017-08-07	5	480
D_Rev_129	GER_P5	Amazon Kunde	2017-08-04	5	305
D_Rev_130	GER_P5	Ersin	2017-08-02	2	641
D_Rev_131	GER_P5	Mantis	2017-08-01	5	4635
D_Rev_132	GER_P5	nvsg	2017-07-19	2	9954
D_Rev_133	GER_P5	M. Franco	2017-07-03	5	150
D_Rev_134	GER_P5	Morphy Morph	2017-06-25	5	112
D_Rev_135	GER_P5	Hadron Collider	2017-06-16	5	922
D_Rev_136	GER_P5	Shiningmind	2017-06-15	4	1855
D_Rev_137	GER_P5	Amazon Kunde	2017-06-01	5	553
D_Rev_138	GER_P5	Tobi	2017-05-29	5	472
D_Rev_139	GER_P5	DopeWurst	2017-05-18	1	495
D_Rev_140	GER_P5	Bender A.	2017-05-18	5	325
D_Rev_141	GER_P5	VincentV	2017-05-18	1	900
D_Rev_142	GER_P5	Manuel	2017-05-16	5	191
D_Rev_143	GER_P5	Amazon Kunde	2017-05-10	4	155
D_Rev_144	GER_P5	Morendor	2017-05-08	5	5243
D_Rev_145	GER_P5	Sebastian Haslinger	2017-05-08	5	726
D_Rev_146	GER_P5	R. Bolduan	2017-05-07	5	1617
D_Rev_147	GER_P5	Ibo	2017-05-05	5	365
D_Rev_148	GER_P5	Markus Wendel	2017-05-01	5	297
D_Rev_149	GER_P5	Bera	2017-04-27	5	711
D_Rev_150	GER_P5	Amazon Kunde	2017-04-22	5	287
D_Rev_151	GER_P5	NexusTsunami	2017-04-18	5	5268
D_Rev_152	GER_P5	Sunanna	2017-04-18	5	890
D_Rev_153	GER_P5	Martin	2017-04-17	2	569
D_Rev_154	GER_P5	Crimson	2017-04-15	5	178
D_Rev_155	GER_P5	f.h.	2017-04-12	5	1840
D_Rev_156	GER_P5	DaddelZeit!	2017-04-12	5	7472
D_Rev_157	GER_P5	Florian Merz	2017-04-12	5	278
D_Rev_158	GER_P5	Justin Schneider	2017-04-10	5	1469
D_Rev_159	GER_P5	Katrin	2017-04-10	5	184
D_Rev_160	GER_P5	Ali Baba	2017-04-07	5	268
D_Rev_161	GER_P5	Ali Sarac	2017-04-07	5	358
D_Rev_162	GER_P5	Videospiele-Fan	2017-04-07	1	415
D_Rev_163	GER_P5	MoS	2017-04-06	5	1164
D_Rev_164	GER_P5	Christian Lühram	2017-06-21	3	3762

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_165	GER_RE7	arthur	2018-04-24	5	109
D_Rev_166	GER_RE7	Sebastian	2018-02-23	5	338
D_Rev_167	GER_RE7	Manuel Lacher	2017-07-25	5	1942
D_Rev_168	GER_RE7	R. Kurdys	2017-03-08	5	1458
D_Rev_169	GER_RE7	Dr.Roflomat	2017-02-02	5	2405
D_Rev_170	GER_RE7	Jens	2017-01-25	1	537
D_Rev_171	GER_Sek	Moritz Hahn	2019-08-22	1	667
D_Rev_172	GER_Sek	Amazon Kunde	2019-05-18	4	190
D_Rev_173	GER_Sek	dax	2019-05-14	1	5645
D_Rev_174	GER_Sek	Joachim Lehmann	2019-04-05	5	1056
D_Rev_175	GER_Sek	René	2019-04-03	2	522
D_Rev_176	GER_Sek	Jennifer Karrer	2019-03-26	2	642
D_Rev_177	GER_Sek	Toni Berro	2019-03-25	5	522
D_Rev_178	GER_Sek	AkitoXD	2019-03-24	5	628
D_Rev_179	GER_Sek	Reee	2019-03-23	5	246
D_Rev_180	GER_Sek	Zocker	2019-03-23	5	200
D_Rev_181	GER_SRR	Onyx83	2019-02-09	4	2792
D_Rev_182	GER_SRR	Lars Liedtke,	2019-01-29	5	47
D_Rev_183	GER_SRR	Amazon Kunde	2019-01-20	3	831
D_Rev_184	GER_SRR	Kevin	2018-10-07	5	228
D_Rev_185	GER_SRR	Christian W.	2018-09-19	5	277
D_Rev_186	GER_SRR	Evelyn Kansy	2018-09-09	5	91
D_Rev_187	GER_SRR	C. Fuchs	2018-08-14	4	215
D_Rev_188	GER_SRR	Adrian Hock	2018-08-07	5	23
D_Rev_189	GER_SRR	@Jaysonderus	2018-08-05	4	4123
D_Rev_190	GER_SRR	Wasabi	2018-08-01	4	2469
D_Rev_191	GER_SRR	bebedora	2018-08-08	5	514
D_Rev_192	GER_ToB	Fheyt	2019-09-30	5	123
D_Rev_193	GER_ToB	Dannyexx	2019-09-29	3	1345
D_Rev_194	GER_ToB	Mike Janssen	2019-09-25	5	40
D_Rev_195	GER_ToB	Sebastian Schneider	2019-09-18	5	48
D_Rev_196	GER_ToB	NicoleDefekt	2019-08-28	5	1804
D_Rev_197	GER_ToB	JulAmazonCustomer	2017-02-23	5	560
D_Rev_198	GER_ToB	Lucie Lionti	2017-02-12	5	930
D_Rev_199	GER_ToB	Christine	2017-01-30	5	495
D_Rev_200	GER_ToB	Daniel H.	2018-03-29	4	2361
D_Rev_201	GER_ToB	M. Schilling	2017-04-26	3	155
D_Rev_202	GER_ToB	Selina	2017-05-06	5	435
D_Rev_203	GER_ToCS	Trovanus	2019-05-29	5	189
D_Rev_204	GER_ToCS	Bas	2019-05-02	5	183
D_Rev_205	GER_ToCS	Brienchen2401	2019-04-18	5	2411
D_Rev_206	GER_ToCS	Daniel Schrettner	2018-04-04	3	1233

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
D_Rev_207	GER_ToCS	Frankfurt Airport	2016-11-05	5	291
D_Rev_208	GER_ToCS	Andy	2016-06-07	5	3872
D_Rev_209	GER_ToCS	Code-04	2016-05-29	5	4890
D_Rev_210	GER_ToCS	BST64	2016-04-22	4	181
D_Rev_211	GER_ToCS	Yasuo	2016-04-18	5	2196
D_Rev_212	GER_ToCS	Daniel	2016-04-14	5	122
D_Rev_213	GER_ToCS	NexusTsunami	2016-04-04	5	348
D_Rev_214	GER_ToCS	Timo Wolter	2016-04-02	5	348
D_Rev_215	GER_ToCS	Luna	2016-03-25	5	656
D_Rev_216	GER_ToCS	M. Hofmann	2016-02-27	5	2410
D_Rev_217	GER_ToCS	lucas s.	2016-02-19	4	780
D_Rev_218	GER_ToCS	Daniel Elsner	2016-02-08	5	5681
D_Rev_219	GER_ToCS	S. Jennewein	2016-01-31	5	2894
D_Rev_220	GER_ToCS	MoS	2017-01-31	5	2419
D_Rev_221	GER_ToCS2	NexusTsunami	2019-10-01	5	1223
D_Rev_222	GER_ToCS2	Marco Rausch	2019-09-29	5	224
D_Rev_223	GER_ToCS2	Aeric Ravenmoon	2019-07-17	5	599
D_Rev_224	GER_ToCS2	Amazon Kunde	2019-06-11	5	350
D_Rev_225	GER_ToCS2	Belram Milram	2018-06-06	5	187
D_Rev_226	GER_ToCS2	BST64	2017-01-29	5	217
D_Rev_227	GER_ToCS2	firebird777	2016-12-09	5	570
D_Rev_228	GER_ToCS2	NexusTsunami	2016-11-19	5	11343
D_Rev_229	GER_ToCS2	Frankfurt Airport	2016-11-12	5	785
D_Rev_230	GER_Yak0	Pete Sahat	2018-12-18	3	2878
D_Rev_231	GER_Yak0	Doktor von Pain	2017-02-18	4	3818
D_Rev_232	GER_Yak0	MeanMrMustard	2017-02-03	5	2481
D_Rev_233	GER_Yak0	Amazon Kunde	2017-02-01	5	1670
D_Rev_234	GER_Yak0	Robin Ruppmann	2017-01-26	5	394
D_Rev_235	GER_Yak0	soulstation3024	2017-01-25	5	2007
D_Rev_236	GER_ZBotW	Lord Of The Dance	2019-08-07	5	218
D_Rev_237	GER_ZBotW	Toto	2018-10-12	5	361
D_Rev_238	GER_ZBotW	Amazon Kunde	2018-09-26	3	227
D_Rev_239	GER_ZBotW	Ksenija	2018-07-31	5	30
D_Rev_240	GER_ZBotW	Der Albae	2018-06-25	5	331
D_Rev_241	GER_ZBotW	Bla	2018-04-26	5	1027
D_Rev_242	GER_ZBotW	Thomas Werners	2017-12-23	1	800
D_Rev_243	GER_ZBotW	Christoph Schmidt	2017-04-10	5	149
D_Rev_244	GER_ZBotW	Amazon Kunde	2017-04-07	5	295
D_Rev_245	GER_ZBotW	Amazon Kunde	2017-03-14	5	5025
D_Rev_245	GER_ZBotW	Piotr Kuchta	2017-03-09	5	179
J_Rev_001	JAP_DD	ほ	2019-08-19	5	192

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
J_Rev_002	JAP_DD	Re：Mind	2018-10-26	5	364
J_Rev_003	JAP_DD	一寸先は前	2018-06-12	4	152
J_Rev_004	JAP_DD	ユーザーA	2018-01-09	4	417
J_Rev_005	JAP_DD	もんもん	2017-10-27	5	45
J_Rev_006	JAP_DD	ポチラー	2017-10-10	4	1150
J_Rev_007	JAP_DMC5	スナフキン	2019-04-01	5	111
J_Rev_008	JAP_DMC5	ホワイト	2019-03-26	2	557
J_Rev_009	JAP_DMC5	はがてん	2019-03-17	3	371
J_Rev_010	JAP_DMC5	(°ㅂ°`)	2019-03-15	5	750
J_Rev_011	JAP_DMC5	もっさん	2019-03-13	4	550
J_Rev_012	JAP_DMC5	onlyl3	2019-03-12	5	71
J_Rev_013	JAP_DMC5	Amazon カスタマー	2019-03-11	5	174
J_Rev_014	JAP_DQ11	ガラムマサラボーイ	2019-01-03	5	183
J_Rev_015	JAP_DQ11	ぽん	2017-12-24	1	515
J_Rev_016	JAP_DQ11	タヌキさん	2017-09-13	5	360
J_Rev_017	JAP_DQ11	ミラクる•ヤン	2017-07-30	5	193
J_Rev_018	JAP_DQ11	あんころもち	2017-07-29	3	701
J_Rev_019	JAP_DQ11	やきにく	2017-09-09	5	574
J_Rev_020	JAP_FF15	Amazon カスタマー	2017-04-09	4	939
J_Rev_021	JAP_FF15	シナえモン	2017-03-02	1	180
J_Rev_022	JAP_FF15	さやママ	2017-01-23	5	367
J_Rev_023	JAP_FF15	Amazon カスタマー	2017-01-07	4	92
J_Rev_024	JAP_FF15	なく	2016-12-31	2	1054
J_Rev_025	JAP_FF15	コメント短い太郎	2016-12-06	5	182
J_Rev_026	JAP_FF15	TDSK	2016-12-04	5	1798
J_Rev_027	JAP_FF15	これくた	2016-12-03	1	135
J_Rev_028	JAP_FF15	JT	2016-12-02	2	397
J_Rev_029	JAP_FF15	水無月	2016-12-02	1	652
J_Rev_030	JAP_FF15	Ninja	2016-12-01	3	78
J_Rev_031	JAP_FF15	うにゃ	2016-12-01	2	128

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J_Rev_032	JAP_FF15	ちゃーちゃ	2016-11-30	3	1438
J_Rev_033	JAP_FF15	28 リンガー	2016-11-30	1	346
J_Rev_034	JAP_FF15	Amazon カスタマー	2016-11-29	1	92
J_Rev_035	JAP_JUD	a-kun	2019-05-06	5	146
J_Rev_036	JAP_JUD	鳴門の塩	2019-03-01	5	343
J_Rev_037	JAP_JUD	Amazo	2019-02-09	5	563
J_Rev_038	JAP_JUD	ふられ虫	2019-01-18	5	195
J_Rev_039	JAP_JUD	ハム	2018-12-18	1	68
J_Rev_040	JAP_JUD	yuri	2018-12-14	5	251
J_Rev_041	JAP_KH3	我妻	2019-06-13	3	924
J_Rev_042	JAP_KH3	匿名	2019-03-14	2	1291
J_Rev_043	JAP_KH3	寿司酢スキー	2019-03-01	1	1739
J_Rev_044	JAP_KH3	Amazon カスタマー	2019-02-03	5	331
J_Rev_045	JAP_KH3	ypo	2019-01-31	2	214
J_Rev_046	JAP_KH3	くっ	2019-01-27	5	241
J_Rev_047	JAP_KH3	hirobo	2019-01-25	3	431
J_Rev_048	JAP_NA	ふぇにっくす	2019-10-09	5	245
J_Rev_049	JAP_NA	Nroca	2019-09-10	5	44
J_Rev_050	JAP_NA	氏　さん	2019-09-10	5	207
J_Rev_051	JAP_NA	Amazon カスタマー	2019-05-12	2	64
J_Rev_052	JAP_NA	ナナシ	2019-04-22	5	117
J_Rev_053	JAP_NA	よういちろう	2019-04-13	1	61
J_Rev_054	JAP_NA	トラ 619	2019-04-11	3	338
J_Rev_055	JAP_NA	kazplayer	2019-04-04	3	781
J_Rev_056	JAP_NA	syachi	2019-02-22	5	241
J_Rev_057	JAP_NA	ドラゴン＆ボーイ	2019-02-21	5	111
J_Rev_058	JAP_NK2	Wednesday	2018-07-27	4	6380
J_Rev_059	JAP_NK2	Amazon ユーザー	2018-06-10	5	89
J_Rev_060	JAP_NK2	スイシン	2018-04-08	3	262
J_Rev_061	JAP_NK2	Kindle のお客様	2018-04-08	5	357
J_Rev_062	JAP_NK2	ビービー	2018-04-08	5	220
J_Rev_063	JAP_NK2	Amazon カスタマー	2018-03-29	2	403

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
J_Rev_064	JAP_Oct	ヒマ	2019-01-04	5	362
J_Rev_065	JAP_Oct	Meiji-Dan	2018-07-19	5	797
J_Rev_066	JAP_Oct	Amazon カスタマー	2018-07-16	5	119
J_Rev_067	JAP_Oct	kin	2018-07-16	4	605
J_Rev_068	JAP_Oct	ひとひらのかけら	2018-07-15	5	304
J_Rev_069	JAP_P5	白薔薇のつぼみ	2018-02-10	1	965
J_Rev_070	JAP_P5	玩具大好きおじさん	2018-01-31	5	470
J_Rev_071	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2018-01-20	5	172
J_Rev_072	JAP_P5	しなしな	2017-12-11	5	1152
J_Rev_073	JAP_P5	QBFOX	2017-11-11	5	384
J_Rev_074	JAP_P5	nono	2017-10-10	4	626
J_Rev_075	JAP_P5	あさ	2017-09-26	4	1095
J_Rev_076	JAP_P5	五月雨	2017-09-20	5	389
J_Rev_077	JAP_P5	karubi	2017-09-19	4	429
J_Rev_078	JAP_P5	モコりん	2017-09-09	5	454
J_Rev_079	JAP_P5	キング・ケイ	2017-06-25	5	383
J_Rev_080	JAP_P5	神木　大介	2017-06-04	5	684
J_Rev_081	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2017-05-01	5	254
J_Rev_082	JAP_P5	おきしげん	2017-05-01	2	1165
J_Rev_083	JAP_P5	だいまる	2017-04-28	5	1719
J_Rev_084	JAP_P5	ちゃーちゃ	2017-04-27	5	1018
J_Rev_085	JAP_P5	イムホテップ	2017-03-27	5	209
J_Rev_086	JAP_P5	町の本屋	2017-03-15	5	73
J_Rev_087	JAP_P5	えりんぎ	2017-03-14	5	293
J_Rev_088	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2017-03-12	5	49
J_Rev_089	JAP_P5	テッペリン	2017-03-12	5	582
J_Rev_090	JAP_P5	虫万崎	2017-03-11	5	400
J_Rev_091	JAP_P5	きらきら	2017-03-05	5	108
J_Rev_092	JAP_P5	london	2017-02-17	5	64
J_Rev_093	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2017-01-29	5	153
J_Rev_094	JAP_P5	yoyoyo	2017-01-22	5	576

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J_Rev_095	JAP_P5	はにわはにお	2017-01-21	5	239
J_Rev_096	JAP_P5	アラフォーのトリックスター	2017-01-21	5	1561
J_Rev_097	JAP_P5	miami	2017-01-20	3	534
J_Rev_098	JAP_P5	渚遙夏	2017-01-20	5	106
J_Rev_099	JAP_P5	哈転候	2017-01-19	5	753
J_Rev_100	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2017-01-09	5	52
J_Rev_101	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2016-12-20	5	35
J_Rev_102	JAP_P5	バンク	2016-12-19	5	60
J_Rev_103	JAP_P5	リン酸塩	2016-12-16	5	103
J_Rev_104	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2016-12-09	5	83
J_Rev_105	JAP_P5	川島	2016-12-05	5	534
J_Rev_106	JAP_P5	s+review	2016-12-01	5	158
J_Rev_107	JAP_P5	お漬け物	2016-11-29	5	107
J_Rev_108	JAP_P5	Lain	2016-11-28	5	295
J_Rev_109	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2016-11-23	5	98
J_Rev_110	JAP_P5	サラン	2016-10-01	5	168
J_Rev_111	JAP_P5	high-field	2016-09-28	5	349
J_Rev_112	JAP_P5	Amazon カスタマー	2016-09-23	5	52
J_Rev_113	JAP_P5	えんがわの者	2016-09-23	5	70
J_Rev_114	JAP_P5	knkn	2016-09-16	5	8607
J_Rev_115	JAP_P5	Amazon Customer	2016-09-16	5	2442
J_Rev_116	JAP_RE7	はくめい	2017-06-11	5	50
J_Rev_117	JAP_RE7	何回難解	2017-02-14	5	212
J_Rev_118	JAP_RE7	ボシ	2017-02-07	3	320
J_Rev_119	JAP_RE7	広角砲	2017-01-29	3	264
J_Rev_120	JAP_RE7	ポーカー	2017-01-27	5	38
J_Rev_121	JAP_RE7	kouto	2017-01-27	1	400
J_Rev_122	JAP_Sek	とと	2019-06-19	5	79
J_Rev_123	JAP_Sek	そもだはると	2019-05-31	4	91
J_Rev_124	JAP_Sek	Amazon カスタマー	2019-05-24	5	166
J_Rev_125	JAP_Sek	wasabi	2019-04-18	5	717

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
J_Rev_126	JAP_Sek	ＭＯＭＯＭＯ	2019-04-08	1	101
J_Rev_127	JAP_Sek	やっくみー	2019-04-07	5	619
J_Rev_128	JAP_Sek	BLUE さん	2019-04-02	2	69
J_Rev_129	JAP_Sek	Amazon カスタマー	2019-03-29	5	478
J_Rev_130	JAP_Sek	あああああ。	2019-03-29	5	1238
J_Rev_131	JAP_Sek	GOH	2019-03-25	5	499
J_Rev_132	JAP_SRR	きよ	2018-12-16	5	257
J_Rev_133	JAP_SRR	土屋飛斑	2018-09-24	2	109
J_Rev_134	JAP_SRR	きつねうどん	2018-06-24	2	194
J_Rev_135	JAP_SRR	羊飼い	2018-05-29	1	73
J_Rev_136	JAP_SRR	空白	2018-05-27	5	115
J_Rev_137	JAP_SRR	陸@	2018-05-25	1	320
J_Rev_138	JAP_SRR	Amazon カスタマー	2018-05-12	3	176
J_Rev_139	JAP_SRR	ｐｓｒ	2018-05-05	4	776
J_Rev_140	JAP_SRR	助さん	2018-05-04	4	284
J_Rev_141	JAP_SRR	persona	2018-05-01	3	241
J_Rev_142	JAP_SRR	アリ太郎	2018-04-25	3	159
J_Rev_143	JAP_SRR	おっけい！	2018-04-15	2	93
J_Rev_144	JAP_SRR	あかのめ	2018-04-12	2	472
J_Rev_145	JAP_SRR	Amazon カスタマー	2018-04-12	3	305
J_Rev_146	JAP_SRR	無名世界	2018-04-09	3	2823
J_Rev_147	JAP_SRR	Amazon カスタマー	2018-04-09	4	225
J_Rev_148	JAP_SRR	ぶーやん	2018-04-02	3	369
J_Rev_149	JAP_SRR	Amazon カスタマー	2018-04-02	3	733
J_Rev_150	JAP_SRR	ガング	2018-04-01	5	126
J_Rev_151	JAP_SRR	KOOH	2018-03-30	2	229
J_Rev_152	JAP_SRR	nakaniwa	2018-03-30	5	508
J_Rev_153	JAP_SRR	犬	2018-03-30	2	239
J_Rev_154	JAP_SRR	永遠の 1700 歳	2018-03-30	4	295
J_Rev_155	JAP_ToB	Amazon カスタマー	2018-09-19	2	79

ID	Game	Author	Date	Rating	Length (Characters)
J_Rev_156	JAP_ToB	海外に住んてた	2018-05-02	4	95
J_Rev_157	JAP_ToB	鷹	2017-09-11	5	51
J_Rev_158	JAP_ToB	Amazon カスタマー	2017-04-25	5	97
J_Rev_159	JAP_ToB	もちもち	2017-03-27	2	1192
J_Rev_160	JAP_ToB	レッドアクス	2017-01-10	2	424
J_Rev_161	JAP_ToB	Amazon カスタマー	2016-12-23	3	421
J_Rev_162	JAP_ToB	taka	2016-10-04	5	968
J_Rev_163	JAP_ToB	公開名	2016-09-01	5	235
J_Rev_164	JAP_ToB	Amazon カスタマー	2016-08-21	4	160
J_Rev_165	JAP_ToB	arumeu	2016-08-19	5	72
J_Rev_166	JAP_ToB	nina	2016-08-18	5	138
J_Rev_167	JAP_ToCS	テック 2377	2017-07-12	1	182
J_Rev_168	JAP_ToCS	0000	2016-08-13	2	251
J_Rev_169	JAP_ToCS	レイ	2016-03-13	5	48
J_Rev_170	JAP_ToCS	プラネットハリアー	2015-12-26	2	253
J_Rev_171	JAP_ToCS	Amazon カスタマー	2015-07-30	3	172
J_Rev_172	JAP_ToCS	失われた９５６	2014-01-03	3	147
J_Rev_173	JAP_ToCS	kocolex	2013-10-27	3	1430
J_Rev_174	JAP_ToCS	なんやねん	2013-10-25	2	782
J_Rev_175	JAP_ToCS	Linde	2013-10-09	3	277
J_Rev_176	JAP_ToCS	にゃん	2013-10-05	3	722
J_Rev_177	JAP_ToCS	t.k	2013-09-27	3	315
J_Rev_178	JAP_ToCS2	gauso	2017-10-11	3	1047
J_Rev_179	JAP_ToCS2	ぶうすけさん	2017-09-22	3	463
J_Rev_180	JAP_ToCS2	rokosicitn22	2017-09-04	3	323
J_Rev_181	JAP_ToCS2	Amazon カスタマー	2017-08-15	1	884
J_Rev_182	JAP_ToCS2	ななちゃん.S	2017-02-21	2	1926
J_Rev_183	JAP_ToCS2	缶カン	2016-11-10	1	197
J_Rev_184	JAP_ToCS2	テック 2377	2016-08-03	1	125
J_Rev_185	JAP_ToCS2	アリス	2015-09-08	3	228
J_Rev_186	JAP_ToCS2	yoshino※	2015-07-18	1	46
J_Rev_187	JAP_ToCS2	a	2015-03-21	1	268
J_Rev_188	JAP_ToCS2	knkn	2015-01-11	2	914

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J_Rev_189	JAP_ToCS2	milamila	2014-12-09	2	2863
J_Rev_190	JAP_ToCS2	Amazon カスタマー	2014-11-02	1	1006
J_Rev_191	JAP_ToCS2	菜名	2014-10-31	2	1020
J_Rev_192	JAP_ToCS2	Amazon カスタマー	2014-10-30	1	474
J_Rev_193	JAP_ToCS2	山野	2014-10-23	3	50
J_Rev_194	JAP_ToCS2	DOBONJO	2014-10-16	1	90
J_Rev_195	JAP_ToCS2	akuan	2014-10-12	1	387
J_Rev_196	JAP_ToCS2	ゲーム三昧	2014-10-03	3	899
J_Rev_197	JAP_YAK0	白猫	2019-07-16	3	665
J_Rev_198	JAP_Yak0	なあ	2015-04-05	5	343
J_Rev_199	JAP_Yak0	norinorinori777	2015-03-31	4	356
J_Rev_200	JAP_Yak0	かっこう	2015-03-15	5	2000
J_Rev_201	JAP_Yak0	ヒロト	2015-03-13	4	94
J_Rev_202	JAP_Yak0	a	2015-03-12	5	664
J_Rev_203	JAP_ZBotW	nyanta	2019-07-14	4	1231
J_Rev_204	JAP_ZBotW	NAHKI	2017-12-28	5	1024
J_Rev_205	JAP_ZBotW	ラッコ君	2017-08-29	3	194
J_Rev_206	JAP_ZBotW	minotaurs	2017-08-23	5	111
J_Rev_207	JAP_ZBotW	Blender Magazine	2017-05-24	3	924
J_Rev_208	JAP_ZBotW	なんでもカスタマー	2017-05-19	5	141
J_Rev_209	JAP_ZBotW	ユーザー 1	2017-05-17	5	315
J_Rev_210	JAP_ZBotW	える	2017-05-16	5	524
J_Rev_211	JAP_ZBotW	BOSS	2017-05-15	5	90
J_Rev_212	JAP_ZBotW	アームズ魂	2017-04-15	5	374
J_Rev_213	JAP_ZBotW	アームズ魂	2017-04-10	5	374
J_Rev_214	JAP_ZBotW	gabane88	2017-03-03	5	554

B-2 Example of a German User Review on Final Fantasy XV (D_Rev_048)

Im Kern unterhaltsames, allerdings unfertiges Spiel
2016-12-20 00:00:00

Ich möchte dieser Rezension meine finale Meinung direkt zu Anfang stellen, da sich während dem Lesen sonst der Eindruck aufdrängen könnte, dass ich Final Fantasy XV nicht mögen und daher in Grund und Boden reden würde, was allerdings nicht der Fall ist. Auch wenn ich den Kauf des Spiels nicht empfehlen kann, hatte ich eine spaßige Zeit mit dem Spiel. Dennoch hat es eine Menge Schwächen, die es wert sind angesprochen zu werden. Und dabei rede ich nicht von kleineren Problemchen die man ignorieren oder sich schönreden kann, sondern solche die das Gesamterlebnis signifikant beeinflusst haben und ein Spiel, das vom Konzept her grandios hätte sein können, zu einer lediglich „unterhaltsamen“ Beta degradiert haben.
Wie die meisten sicherlich Wissen, war Final Fantasy XV jetzt beinahe 10 Jahre in Entwicklung, wobei das Konzept immer wieder verworfen und das Spiel nur geplant wurde. Ursprünglich als Teil der FFXIII Reihe geplant, hat man sich auf seiten Square Enix von diesem Vorhaben nach den massiven Kritiken über diesem Ableger distanziert. Und dieser lange und verzweigte Entwicklungszyklus zeigt sich im fertigen Spiel, denn ohne es beschönigen zu wollen: Es ist unfertig.
Das generelle Konzept des Spiels ist streng genommen munter zusammengeklaut: Der Tag/Nacht-Erreichen in der offenen Welt und die gefährlichen Gegner bei Nacht erinnern an Dragons Dogma, wenn auch mit wesentlich simplerem Kampfsystem. Die großen, anfangs unmöglich zu bewältigenden Feinde an Xenoblade. Auch an anderen Final Fantasys wurde sich orientiert, so gibt es beispielsweise einen Meteor, der im späteren Storyverlauf eine Rolle spielt. Und beim Stichwort Story beginnt auch der Hauptkritikpunkt des Spiels.
Auch wenn sich hinter der vorhandenen Story des Spiels ein sehr gutes Konzept mit interessanten Charakteren, einer nicht unbedingt innovativen, aber dennoch bewährten Prämisse (böses böses Imperium greift an) und ineinander verwobenen Handlungssträngen steht, so ist die Präsentation all dieser Dinge enttäuschend.
Dieses Problem wird vor allem im letzten Drittel des Spiels deutlich: Die Handlung wird schlagartig vorangetrieben, Charaktere die vorher aufgebaut wurden werden plötzlich rasend schnell abgefertigt oder komplett fallen gelassen ohne das man weiß was mit ihnen passiert ist und die Story nimmt eine unglaubliche Kehrtwende. Als Spieler bekommt man das Gefühl viel zu viel von dem, was sich in den anderen Handlungssträngen abspielt, nicht mitzubekommen und sitzt dann bei manchen Szenen ratlos vor dem Bildschirm, unsicher was man denn jetzt

fühlen soll. Denn man weiß zwar, wie einige Entwicklungen der Story gedacht sind, dies sticht sich aber mit der teilweise diffusen und rasanten Präsentation, die sich gegen Ende hin kaum noch Zeit nimmt angefangene Handlungsstränge zu verknüpfen. Auch gameplaytechnisch macht das Spiel hier einen herben Einschnitt: Es gibt keine offene Welt mehr, stattdessen schmeißt das Spiel den Spieler von einem Ort zum nächsten. Ich möchte nicht zu viel ins Detail gehen, um Spoiler zu vermeiden, jedoch wird ein überwiegender Großteil dessen, was zu Anfang des Spiels wie eine Einführung in eine große Story mit vielen Twists wirkt, über Bord geworfen.

Dies deckt sich vor allem sehr gut mit dem 2013 veröffentlichten Trailer, in dem einige Szenen, als auch ein imposanter Bosskampf angeteasert wurden. Zwar ist dieser Bosskampf immernoch im Spiel enthalten, allerdings nicht einmal ansatzweise in der Form, wie er im Trailer präsentiert wurde, stattdessen wurde er arg simplifiziert, genau wie das Story Segment in dem dieser Bosskampf stattfindet.

Generell enthält das Spiel wenige Bosse, die wirklich einzigartig sind. Meistens sind es normale Gegner, die auch im späteren Spielverlauf auftauchen können. Zwar ist die musikalische Untermalung in vielen Fällen grandios, darüber hinwegtrösten das man das neue Kampfsystem hauptsächlich dazu nutzen kann um seelenlose Jagdquests oder „bringe Item A nach Ort B“-quests zu erledigen kann es sie allerdings nicht.

Dies ist besonders schade, da das Kampfsystem, wenn auch nicht sonderlich komplex, unglaublich Spaß machen kann. Eine Taste lässt Noctis automatisch angreifen, eine andere lässt ihn im Falle eines Angriffs ausweichen, was anschließend MP verbraucht. Zauber kosten keine MP, sondern werden mithilfe spezieller Energieressourcen hergestellt und in Phiolen gefüllt. Klingt erstmal umständlich, aber bei dem gewaltigen Schaden den die Zauber in diesem Spiel verursachen können eher nebensächlich. Um die Kämpfe abzurunden kann Noctis über das Schlachtfeld warpen, was das Kampftempo zusätzlich hochtreibt. Seine Verbündeten haben zwar nicht die schlauste KI, machen allerdings genug Schaden um ihren Präsenz spüren zu können.

Lediglich sterben ist kaum möglich, da man eigentlich immer Zeit hat einen Heiltrank zu nehmen. Sollten die HP doch einmal 0 erreichen, wechselt Noctis in den kritischen Modus. Hier nehmen die maximal-HP ab. Erreichen auch diese Null, friert der Kampf ein, und man hat Zeit eine teure Phönixfeder zu benutzen, bevor es endgültig game Over heißt.

Wer also auf der Suche nach herausforderung ist, ist hier Fehl am Platz, denn den Game Over Screen sollte man eigentlich niemals sehen, solange man nicht gänzlich ohne Heilgegenstände herumläuft.

Ebenfalls problematisch ist die offensichtliche DLC-Politik, die Sqaure Enix mit diesem Spiel betreibt. Die ersten 3 Charakter dlc‘s werden sich um Noctis Begleiter drehen. Es ist schon jetzt deutlich, das einer dieser dlc‘s zu dem Zeitpunkt stattfinden wird, als einer dieser Begleiter die Gruppe für ein Kapitel verlässt, ohne anschließend zu erklären warum. Dies riecht sehr stark nach herausgeschnittenem Content – wenig nachvollziehbar, wo das Spiel im letzten Drittel ohnehin sehr rasant abgefertigt wird. Während in dem mir persönlich verhassten FFXIII gefühlt 70% der handlungsrelevanten Informationen in journale verlagert wurden, fehlen diese in FFXV völlig. Selbst für die Begleiter von Noctis, die an und für sich spaßige Gesellen sind und nicht in typischen JRPG-Klischees versinken, fehlt so gut wie jeglicher Hintergrund.
Alle Zeichen deuten darauf hin, das dem Entwicklerteam das releasedatum Ende 2016 als Frist gesetzt wurde. Nach all dem hin und her wärend der Entwicklungszeit scheint am Ende nicht genug Zeit geblieben zu sein, dass Konzept, auf welches man sich letztlich geeinigt hat, angemessen umzusetzen. Dies wird dadurch bestärkt, das „Story fixes“ bereits in Form von patches angekündigt wurden. Diese solle zusätzliche Szenen und Bosse ins Spiel einbinden, sowie das gameplaytechnisch vollkommen verhunzte Kapitel 13 überarbeiten, durch welches ich mich regelrecht durchquälen musste, weil es so langweilig, linear und abwechslungslos war und sich wie ein schlecht implementiertes Deus Ex Machina Storysegment anfülte.
Es ist schade, das dieses Spiel so viel falsch gemacht hat. Eine im Kern gute Story mit guten Handlungssträngen, ein gutes Kampfsystem das man aber beinahe nur dazu nutzt um lieblose Nebenquests abzuklappern. Und nicht nur hier zeigt sich, wie das Spiel gerusht wurde: Während die Storydungeons am Anfang des Spiels noch sehr detailreich dargestellt sind, verkommen die post-game Dungeons zu einem simplen Baukastenprinzip, in denen es immer von einem Raum durch einen kleinen Gang in den nächsten geht, mit ständig der gleichen Wandtextur. Keine Details, wie verlassene Bergewerksausrüstung mehr, keine Stühle, Tische oder irgendetwas was die gähnende leere dieser Bereiche ausfüllen wurde.
Final Fantasy XV ist an sich ein unterhaltsames Spiel. Das Kampfsystem macht Spaß, die Story weckt anfangs Interesse daran mehr zu erfahren und die offene Welt ist absolut wunderschön gestaltet. Aber selbst hier gibt es Kritik, das die große Weltkarte eine Mogelpackung ist: Gut 30-40% sind schlicht nicht zugänglich und durch Zäune abgeriegelt. Es fühlt sich so an, als hätte es noch mindestens ein Jahr gebraucht, bis es auf den Markt hätte kommen dürfen. Ohne zynisch klingen zu wollen, aber mich würde eine „überarbeitete“ Version von FFXV, die innerhalb der nächsten zwei Jahre für den Vollpreis auf den Markt kommt, kaum wundern.
Fakt ist, man kann mit dem Spiel Spaß haben. Dafür muss man es aber schaffen den Gedanken daran, wie grandios das Spiel hätte sein können, auszublenden. Die Bewertung des Spiels kann

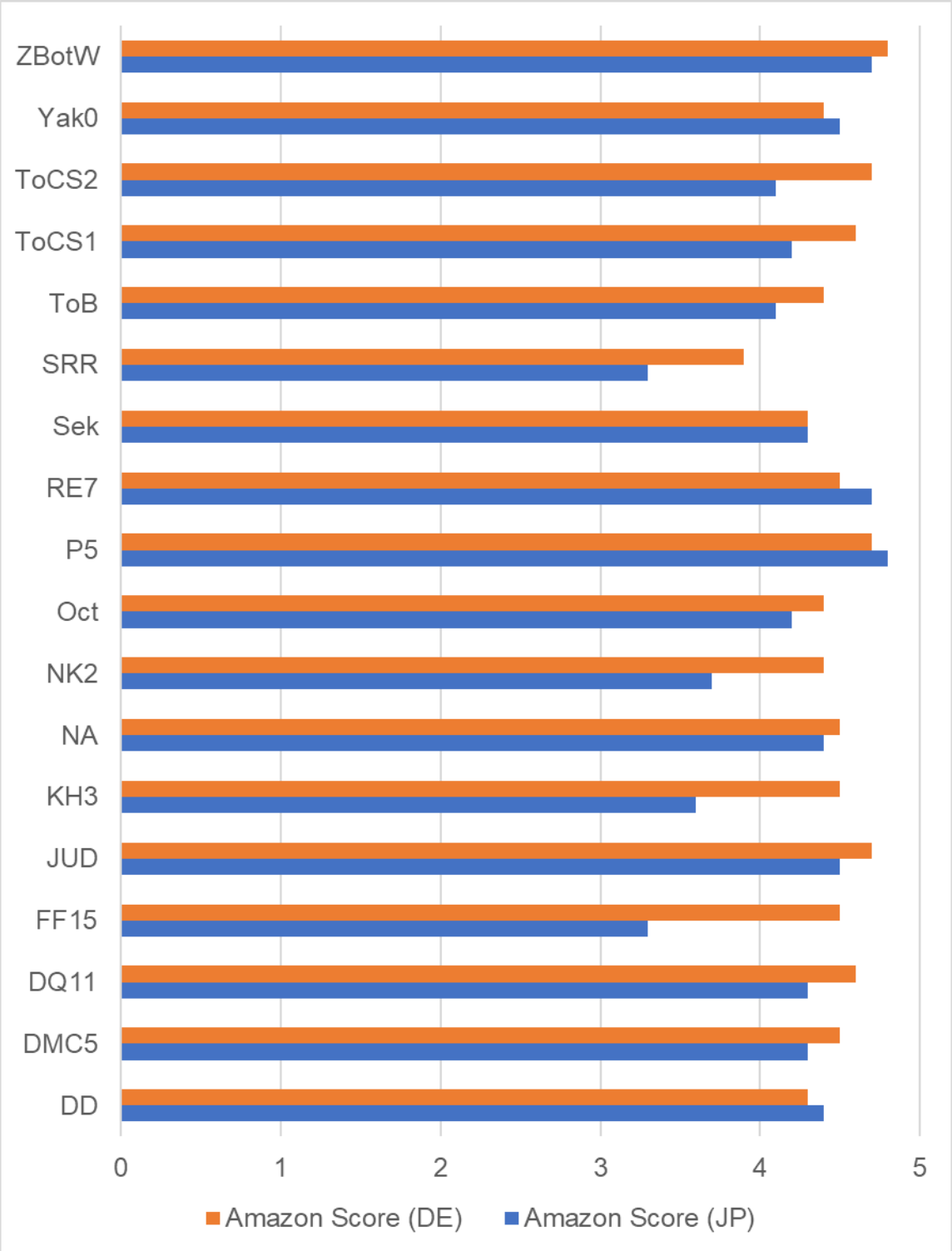
man aus verschiedenen Blickwinkeln sehen: Zwar hat es mir durchaus Spaß gemacht, und im Gegensatz zu FFXIII bereue ich den Kauf nicht, aber die genannten Kritikpunkte verleihen dem Ganzen einen gehörigen Dämpfer und geben mir das Gefühl, dass mir als Käufer ein unfertiges Produkt angedreht wurde. Und auch wenn ich eine unterhaltsame Zeit mit diesem unfertigen Produkt hatte, fühlte ich mich ein wenig hintergangen, als ich gegen Ende feststellen konnte, wie unfertig es war.

Eine klare Kaufempfehlung kann ich daher nicht aussprechen, allein schon aus Prinzip. Freilich habe ich auch schon schlechtere Spiele gespielt, dennoch darf es sich keinesfalls einbürgern unfertige Spiele auf den Markt zu schmeißen, die erst dann „gefixt“ werden wenn der anschließende Aufschrei der Community laut genug ist. Denn ohne es schönzureden, im jetzigen Zustand wirkt FFXV wie eine Beta. Zwar können auch Betas unterhaltsam sein, wenn aber dafür Vollpreis verlangt wird sollten bei jedem die Alarmglocken klingeln.

Als besondere Fußnote allerdings möchte ich anmerken, das der Gegner „Sir Tomberry“, die wahrscheinlich beste Umsetzung eines Tomberrys in allen Final Fantasy spielen ist. Tut im Rahmen dieser Bewertung vergleichsweise wenig zur Sache, aber ich ich kann diese Rezension nicht ruhigen gewissens abschließen ohne das angemerkt zu haben.

Appendix C

C-1 Comparison of the Amazon Score for the German and Japanese reviews per game, with 5 being the highest possible score.



Appendix D

D-1 Word Frequencies for the 50 most frequents words in the German document set

Word	Word length	Frequency	%	Rank	Documents	Documents %
story	5	2026	0.73	1	1085	31.51
gut	3	1939	0.70	2	1073	31.16
zelda	5	1474	0.53	3	605	17.57
teil	4	1406	0.51	4	699	20.30
welt	4	1145	0.41	5	628	18.24
grafik	6	1091	0.39	6	838	24.34
spielen	7	1079	0.39	7	767	22.28
fantasy	7	1028	0.37	8	440	12.78
stunden	7	1014	0.37	9	688	19.98
final	5	1007	0.36	10	431	12.52
spiele	6	914	0.33	11	687	19.95
gegner	6	895	0.32	12	488	14.17
leider	6	890	0.32	13	553	16.06
kampfsystem	11	824	0.30	14	554	16.09
gespielt	8	822	0.30	15	652	18.94
ganz	4	815	0.29	16	540	15.68
spaß	4	809	0.29	17	626	18.18
evil	4	794	0.29	18	317	9.21
zeit	4	784	0.28	19	520	15.10
resident	8	766	0.28	20	308	8.95
charaktere	10	723	0.26	21	440	12.78
können	6	699	0.25	22	468	13.59
super	5	689	0.25	23	550	15.97
ende	4	672	0.24	24	432	12.55
kommt	5	670	0.24	25	496	14.41
spiels	6	614	0.22	26	365	10.60
vr	2	570	0.21	27	223	6.48
richtig	7	569	0.21	28	427	12.40
besser	6	556	0.20	29	422	12.26
schnell	7	544	0.20	30	411	11.94
ff	2	538	0.19	31	242	7.03
gameplay	8	534	0.19	32	395	11.47
neue	4	523	0.19	33	380	11.04

Word	Word length	Frequency	%	Rank	Documents	Documents %
reihe	5	508	0.18	34	362	10.51
waffen	6	506	0.18	35	311	9.03
jedoch	6	505	0.18	36	298	8.66
geschichte	10	504	0.18	37	333	9.67
fan	3	488	0.18	38	427	12.40
sekiro	6	468	0.17	39	154	4.47
gutes	5	465	0.17	40	381	11.07
endlich	7	459	0.17	41	348	10.11
teile	5	456	0.16	42	360	10.46
world	5	448	0.16	43	305	8.86
lange	5	446	0.16	44	377	10.95
paar	4	439	0.16	45	327	9.50
spieler	7	437	0.16	46	280	8.13
souls	5	433	0.16	47	185	5.37
beste	5	431	0.16	48	353	10.25
meinung	7	427	0.15	49	327	9.50
top	3	427	0.15	49	352	10.22
nintendo	8	424	0.15	51	286	8.31
einige	6	423	0.15	52	307	8.92
anfang	6	420	0.15	53	325	9.44
switch	6	418	0.15	54	317	9.21
open	4	410	0.15	55	286	8.31
sogar	5	409	0.15	56	303	8.80
musik	5	401	0.14	57	278	8.07
wäre	4	401	0.14	57	320	9.29
absolut	7	398	0.14	59	291	8.45
weiter	6	396	0.14	60	314	9.12
lassen	6	392	0.14	61	282	8.19
schön	5	385	0.14	62	317	9.21
titel	5	381	0.14	63	277	8.05
vielen	6	381	0.14	63	294	8.54
kurz	4	380	0.14	65	315	9.15
einmal	6	373	0.13	66	264	7.67
fans	4	369	0.13	67	298	8.66
kämpfe	6	369	0.13	67	270	7.84
trotzdem	8	362	0.13	69	299	8.68
kampf	5	359	0.13	70	254	7.38

Word	Word length	Frequency	%	Rank	Documents	Documents %
kaum	4	357	0.13	71	269	7.81
gerade	6	355	0.13	72	265	7.70
schwer	6	350	0.13	73	277	8.05
gute	4	346	0.12	74	292	8.48
komplett	8	346	0.12	74	256	7.44
kommen	6	342	0.12	76	280	8.13
recht	5	340	0.12	77	245	7.12
ganze	5	338	0.12	78	261	7.58
besten	6	336	0.12	79	292	8.48
spielzeit	9	336	0.12	79	272	7.90
ps4	3	335	0.12	81	255	7.41
genau	5	334	0.12	82	266	7.73
schade	6	333	0.12	83	268	7.78
oft	3	329	0.12	84	249	7.23
dungeons	8	328	0.12	85	191	5.55
wohl	4	328	0.12	85	244	7.09
gefühl	6	325	0.12	87	246	7.14
bisher	6	324	0.12	88	238	6.91
weg	3	323	0.12	89	267	7.75
atmosphäre	10	322	0.12	90	255	7.41
deutsche	8	319	0.12	91	230	6.68
geben	5	318	0.11	92	272	7.90
liebe	5	317	0.11	93	250	7.26
persönlich	10	315	0.11	94	237	6.88
spielt	6	310	0.11	95	258	7.49
konnte	6	303	0.11	96	249	7.23
alten	5	302	0.11	97	236	6.85
anders	6	302	0.11	97	244	7.09
extrem	6	301	0.11	99	217	6.30
bereits	7	299	0.11	100	232	6.74
teilweise	9	299	0.11	100	234	6.80

D-2 Dictionary Created for the Quantitative Analysis

Category	Search item
Gameplay	gameplay
Gameplay	システム
Gameplay	ゲームプレイ
Gameplay	Mechanik
Gameplay	Systeme
Gameplay	メカニック
Gameplay	アクション
Gameplay	Kampfsystem
Gameplay	Skills
Gameplay	動き
Gameplay	Bewegung
Gameplay	アイテム
Gameplay	Item
Gameplay	Schwierigkeitsgrad
Gameplay	難易度
Gameplay	戦闘
Gameplay	バトル
Gameplay	Kampf
Gameplay	Move
Gameplay	Angriffe
Gameplay	攻撃
Gameplay	アタック
Gameplay	Steuerung
Gameplay	操作
Gameplay	コントロール
Gameplay	Kamera
Gameplay	カメラ
Gameplay	ダンジョン
Gameplay	Dungeon

Category	Search item
Gameplay	バトルシステム
Gameplay	action
Sound	Musik
Sound	Soundtrack
Sound	Sound
Sound	Lied
Sound	音楽
Sound	サウンドトラック
Sound	Lieder
Sound	音
Sound	Ton
Sound	BGM
Sound	歌
Sound	Soundeffekt
Sound	Soundeffekte
Visual	Grafik
Visual	visuell
Visual	グラフィック
Visual	映像
Visual	画像
Visual	ビジュアル
Visual	アートスタイル
Visual	Artstil
Visual	Grafikstil
Visual	Grafikdesign
Visual	グラフィックデザイン
Visual	optisch
Visual	グラが
Visual	グラは
Visual	グラデデザ
Story	Story

Category	Search item
Story	ストーリー
Story	Szenario
Story	シナリオ
Story	物語
Story	Geschichte
Story	Plot
Story	Storyline
Story	ストーリーライン
Story	Handlung
Story	の話
Story	話が
Story	話の
Story	Narrative
Story	Narrativ
Voice Acting	Synchronsprecher
Voice Acting	声優
Voice Acting	Synchronisation
Voice Acting	Dub
Voice Acting	Stimme
Voice Acting	声
Voice Acting	音声
"Japanese Games"	和ゲー
"Japanese Games"	和ゲーム
"Japanese Games"	日本のゲーム
"Japanese Games"	日本ゲーム
"Japanese Games"	国内のゲーム
"Japanese Games"	日本製のゲーム
"Japanese Games"	japanische spiele
"Japanese Games"	japanischen spielen
"Japanese Games"	japanisches spiel
"Japanese Games"	japanischem spiel

Category	Search item
"Western games"	wesltiche Spiele
"Western games"	Spiele aus dem Westen
"Western games"	amerikanische Spiele
"Western games"	europäische Spiele
"Western games"	欧米のゲーム
"Western games"	洋ゲー
"Western games"	海外のゲーム
"Western games"	アメリカのゲーム
"Western games"	欧州のゲーム
"Western games"	国外のゲーム
"Western games"	西欧のゲーム
"Western games"	洋ゲーム
"Western games"	westliches Spiel
"Western games"	westlichem Spiel
"Western games"	amerikanischem Spiel
"Western games"	westlichen Spielen
Media Comparison	
Media Comparison\Drama	ドラマ
Media Comparison\Drama	Drama
Media Comparison\Drama	Seifenoper
Media Comparison\Light Novel	ライトノベル
Media Comparison\Light Novel	ラノベ
Media Comparison\Light Novel	Ligth Novel
Media Comparison\Anime	アニメ
Media Comparison\Anime	Anime
Media Comparison\Manga	Manga
Media Comparison\Manga	漫画
Media Comparison\Manga	マンガ
Media Comparison\Film	映画
Media Comparison\Film	Film
Media Comparison\Cartoon	Cartoon

Category	Search item
Media Comparison\Visual Novel	Visual Novel
Media Comparison\Visual Novel	ビジュアルノベル
Media Comparison\Fairy Tale	童話
Media Comparison\Fairy Tale	Märchen
Characters	キャラ
Characters	キャラクター
Characters	主人公
Characters	Charaktere
Characters	Protagonist
Characters	Protagonisten
Characters	NPC
Characters	Figuren
Characters	Hauptcharakter
Characters	Hauptcharaktere
Characters	Nebencharakter
Characters	Nebencharaktere
Characters	キャラデザ
Realism	real
Realism	realistisch
Realism	unrealistisch
Realism	abstrakt
Realism	wie in echt
Realism	リアル
Realism	現実的
Realism	非現実的
Realism	アンリアル
Dialogue	会話
Dialogue	Dialog
Dialogue	Dialoge
Dialogue	セリフ
Technology	Ladezeiten
Technology	ロード

Category	Search item
Technology	バグ
Technology	Bug
Technology	Glitch
Technology	Ladedauer
Japaneseness	日本
Japaneseness	Japan
Japaneseness	japanisch
Japaneseness	japanisches
Japaneseness	japanischer
Japaneseness	Fernost
Japaneseness	fernöstlich
Japaneseness	exotisch
Japaneseness	abgedreht
Japaneseness	JRPG
Japaneseness	japano
Cutscenes	Cutscene
Cutscenes	Zwischenanimation
Cutscenes	Zwischensequenz
Cutscenes	カットシーン
Cutscenes	イベントシーン
Pacing	Pacing
Pacing	ペース
Pacing	ペーシング
Freedom/Linearity	
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	オーペンワールド
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	オーペン・ワールド
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	offene Spielwelt
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	Open World
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	Freiheit
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	自由度
Freedom/Linearity\Freedom	自由
Freedom/Linearity\Linearity	linear
Freedom/Linearity\Linearity	一本道

Category	Search item
Freedom/Linearity\Linearity	Schlauchlevel
Freedom/Linearity\Linearity	geradlinig
World	世界観
World	世界
World	ワールド
World	雰囲気
World	Welt
World	Atmosphäre
World	World
World	エリア
World	Gebiet

D-3 Quantitative Analysis of User Reviews by Document Set

Document Set	Germany	Japan	Germany_Good	Germany_Bad	Japan_Good	Japan_Bad	SUM
Gameplay	5.089	33.085	3.068	700	18.179	13.567	73.688
Sound	1.639	5.862	984	226	3.269	2.134	14.114
Visual	1.337	4.934	861	142	2.429	2.253	11.956
Story	3.459	22.665	2.048	478	10.808	10.804	50.262
Voice Acting	245	2.242	179	21	1.273	901	4.861
"Japanese Games"	10	330	8	0	191	138	677
"Western games"	0	372	0	0	214	158	744
Media Comparison	534	3.395	335	66	1.667	1.684	7.681
Characters	1.701	17.674	862	243	8.379	8.179	37.038
Realism	395	1.457	252	50	863	543	3.560
Dialogue	323	1.742	119	75	758	846	3.863
Technology	148	2.933	94	6	1.404	1.492	6.077
Japaneseness	968	1.464	584	92	881	524	4.513
Cutscenes	143	210	65	19	82	121	640
Pacing	11	102	3	5	70	28	219
Freedom/Linearity	556	3.186	355	88	1.722	1.226	7.133
World	2.867	13.085	1.914	370	6.886	5.897	31.019
SUM	19.425	114.738	11.731	2.581	59.075	50.495	258.045

D-4 Quantitative Analysis of User Reviews by Document Group

Document Group	GER_DD	JAP_DD	GER_DMC5	JAP_DMC5	GER_DQ11	JAP_DQ11	GER_FF15	JAP_FF15
Gameplay	29	134	98	1.137	133	2.762	1.544	6.531
Sound	15	5	46	113	129	1.332	349	1.206
Visual	15	14	31	170	76	797	322	1.305
Story	8	31	52	361	132	2.100	1.182	6.227
Voice Acting	0	5	5	49	14	437	36	411
"Japanese Games"	0	3	0	11	1	44	0	86
"Western games"	0	6	0	14	0	58	0	150
Media Comparison	0	2	5	56	20	158	200	1.301
Characters	7	58	22	507	96	2.062	627	3.888
Realism	0	6	4	53	8	162	66	354
Dialogue	3	4	4	11	10	158	97	503
Technology	6	7	3	77	4	221	73	1.448
Japaneseness	0	4	12	43	87	195	93	412
Cutscenes	1	0	1	4	1	22	32	30
Pacing	0	4	0	0	0	17	0	18
Freedom/Linearity	1	21	4	35	1	253	198	791
World	17	40	12	87	66	949	679	3.765
SUM	102	344	299	2.728	778	11.727	5.498	28.426

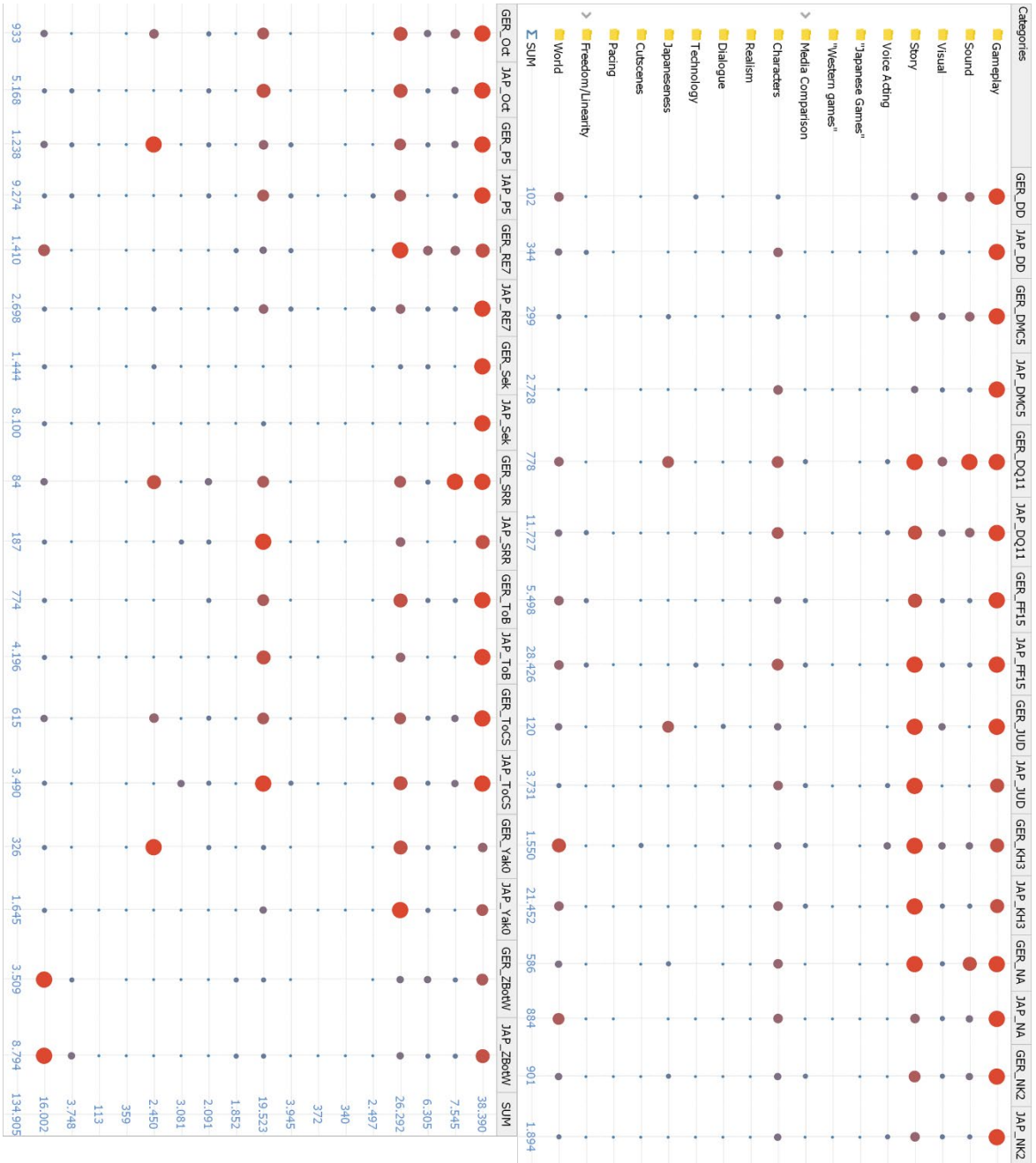
Document Group	GER_JUD	JAP_JUD	GER_KH3	JAP_KH3	GER_NA	JAP_NA	GER_NK2	JAP_NK2
Gameplay	27	970	269	5.132	130	272	268	655
Sound	2	56	119	542	116	89	96	118
Visual	9	69	116	1.176	19	28	38	85
Story	29	1.200	338	5.852	137	140	173	312
Voice Acting	1	157	88	376	4	5	10	138
"Japanese Games"	0	20	1	20	2	5	1	3
"Western games"	0	15	0	10	0	5	0	1
Media Comparison	1	296	82	784	11	3	37	55
Characters	12	641	124	3.298	61	132	87	265
Realism	1	47	23	142	13	2	8	12
Dialogue	4	30	17	326	10	2	13	28
Technology	1	40	1	168	0	15	4	32
Japaneseness	21	37	24	64	35	7	51	18
Cutscenes	1	4	51	86	3	0	1	3
Pacing	0	2	4	8	0	1	1	1
Freedom/Linearity	1	35	12	210	5	13	2	34
World	10	112	281	3.258	40	165	111	134
SUM	120	3.731	1.550	21.452	586	884	901	1.894

Document Group	GER_Oct	JAP_Oct	GER_P5	JAP_P5	GER_RE7	JAP_RE7	GER_Sek	JAP_Sek
Gameplay	203	1.339	257	2.804	280	912	840	5.483
Sound	111	459	106	674	142	124	67	176
Visual	70	252	54	178	183	90	74	139
Story	183	1.053	166	1.641	322	386	117	331
Voice Acting	2	68	10	248	20	83	9	52
"Japanese Games"	0	1	3	42	0	10	0	6
"Western games"	0	0	0	15	0	18	0	6
Media Comparison	5	44	63	244	53	146	6	21
Characters	141	1.116	141	1.784	102	453	38	778
Realism	11	51	16	161	66	84	21	82
Dialogue	27	138	51	243	4	6	11	38
Technology	0	37	2	121	13	59	17	109
Japaneseness	97	59	250	237	4	79	86	95
Cutscenes	3	7	10	19	3	3	4	0
Pacing	0	4	6	4	0	7	0	12
Freedom/Linearity	7	238	32	303	5	15	8	155
World	73	302	71	556	213	223	146	617
SUM	933	5.168	1.238	9.274	1.410	2.698	1.444	8.100

Document Group	GER_SRR	JAP_SRR	GER_ToB	JAP_ToB	GER_ToCS	JAP_ToCS	GER_Yak0	JAP_Yak0
Gameplay	15	53	221	1.460	147	824	50	389
Sound	15	5	45	114	57	252	10	30
Visual	4	3	35	109	28	138	12	70
Story	11	28	177	845	110	678	73	595
Voice Acting	0	0	10	54	4	45	3	44
"Japanese Games"	0	1	0	0	2	4	0	12
"Western games"	0	3	0	2	0	2	0	11
Media Comparison	2	1	17	55	12	76	8	50
Characters	10	60	154	1.121	98	817	16	236
Realism	0	0	0	14	14	17	9	23
Dialogue	6	10	30	78	16	92	16	24
Technology	1	6	0	49	2	311	0	30
Japaneseness	12	4	20	15	73	63	94	28
Cutscenes	2	2	8	6	0	13	6	6
Pacing	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	4
Freedom/Linearity	0	2	6	44	9	38	4	18
World	6	9	51	227	43	120	25	75
SUM	84	187	774	4.196	615	3.490	326	1.645

Document Group	GER_ZBotW	JAP_ZBotW	SUM
Gameplay	794	2.228	38.390
Sound	258	567	7.545
Visual	285	311	6.305
Story	417	885	26.292
Voice Acting	39	70	2.497
"Japanese Games"	0	62	340
"Western games"	0	56	372
Media Comparison	28	103	3.945
Characters	113	458	19.523
Realism	135	247	1.852
Dialogue	30	51	2.091
Technology	21	203	3.081
Japaneseness	27	104	2.450
Cutscenes	22	5	359
Pacing	0	17	113
Freedom/Linearity	267	981	3.748
World	1.073	2.446	16.002
SUM	3.509	8.794	134.905

D-5 MAXQDA Code Matrix for the Quantitative Analysis by Document Group



Appendix E

E-1 Stated Reasons by TAP-Participants for Positive/Negative Evaluation of Dragon's Dogma and Kingdom Hearts III

ID	Dragon's Dogma		Kingdom Hearts III	
	Positive	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Negative**
D01	Realism, Combat, Freedom			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Combat
D02		Freedom / Accessability		Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D03		Freedom / Accessability		Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D04	Realism, Combat			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D05	Realism, Combat, Freedom			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D06	Realism, Combat, Freedom			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Combat
D07	Realism, Combat, Freedom			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D08	Realism, Combat, Freedom			Narrative (Content, Accessibility), Art Style, Combat
D09		Freedom / Accessability	Combat, Graphics, Narrative (Content)	
J01	Realism, Freedom			Narrative (Accessibility), Combat
J02	Realism, Combat, Freedom		Graphics, Art Style	
J03		Realism	Narrative (Content), Combat, Art Style, Graphics	
J04		Freedom / Accessability		Narrative (Accessibility), Combat
J06	Realism, Freedom			Narrative (Accessibility), Combat
J07		Freedom / Accessability	Combat, Graphics	
J08		Freedom / Accessability	Combat, Graphics	
J09		Freedom / Accessability		Narrative (Accessibility), Combat
J10		Freedom / Accessability		Narrative (Accessibility), Combat
J11	Realism, Combat, Freedom		Combat, Graphics	