Th.o.R. #3: the numbers game

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Subjectiveness is subjectiveness, no matter how you put it. Especially if you assign an arbitrary number to it, that tends to look suspiciously objective to the untrained eye at first. This article about game-reviews seems to think otherwise though, but doesnt actually explain in any way or form how the judging-process is made more objective by splitting the reviewers subjective (!) evaluation into two of those pesky little opinions about a game. Yet, he hits all the right marks throughout his article, when it comes to corroborating the value of judging both gameplay and storyline to come to a good judgement of a games "subjective" worth. He adds yet another little touch of pseudo-objectiveness by replacing the term gameplay in his article with "ludologists point of view", which adds to my gut-feeling that the reasoning is somewhat obscurantist. In my opinion - as already stated in another one of my Thoughts on Reviewing - reviewers and critics should embrace their subjectiveness to a point, where they can monitor their likes and dislikes and make better professional recommendations based upon how they react to games on an emotional level. It still not objective, but you should be able to assign a number to that emotional response that will most likely resonate more with readers than trying to objectify your experience, which only leads to less fun with the games anyways.

Since human judgement between different dimensions breaks down to a maximum of five value levels per dimension on which items are judged against each other, it makes sense to also use a scoring system that reflects that. For example going with the following should be sufficient to give a reader an understanding of the relative value of a game: really bad, bad, decent, good, great game. Look ma, no numbers! Do that for gameplay and narrative and we are halfway there =)

Still, he is right. Art can be judged objectively. But not in the way he proposes and / or wishes for.

So, what are objective measures one could try to force upon video games as an artform?

Alot actually, but most - if not all - arent accounting for narrative or gameplay judgements imho. My short-list of objective measures include peculiarities of hardware, software, extras and price.

hardware:
as i said in Th.o.R. #1 i believe that hardware for pcs and on consoles has reached a level where it becomes less and less interesting to talk about hardware-features that are needed to run the games. Still performance on different systems is interesting for the pc-gaming crowd out there still, to make informed guesses on what upgrades to buy next, to get the most bang out of the buck. Performance is still depending on alot of variables of the client-machine, but is most likely the most useful "objective measure" a reviewer can report on. Bugs and stability issues go here as well, but are less prone to be found on all systems, if you look only at pc-gaming. To get this right, you need a professional testing environment though, so it wont help one-man gaming blogs like mine.

software:
objective measures of the game itself are things like the size of the textures, the number of polygons, the average game-length (speedruns vs. all-sidesquests / exploration), the way the game renders the scenes etc.. Of all those parameters only the game-lenght might give the customers somewhat of an impression of what to expect from the game in quality-regards. All the others are subject to the artists expression and the gamers impression thereof.

extras & price:
if one looks at the recent release of the orange box or other special edition releases of games, one will notice that added "goodies" are adding to the experience and are something that objectively presents an added value. If that value is actually worth the price is a subjective evaluation again though...

Trying to make subjective judgement incrementally more objective:
Taking a multitude of ratings from different raters usually helps alot in making a number actually represent something. So doing meta-reviews (like rottentomatoes.com or metacritic.com) will help and make a subjective number into something less subjective. In that sense numbers are still somewhat "ok", but not objective on its own. Use a user-based rating system, so the people who actually play the games and dont just rate them professionally will have a say in it (the larger the user-base of the website the more objective the picture of the proposed "quality").

In conclusion: There is alot to be said about game-reviews and most likely nobody will ever get it right for everybody, but at least some of the more sinister trends of pseudo-objectivism that have taken the reviewing process hostage professionally, should be judged with a keen eye and be rejected for aiding and abetting poor reviews. Judging gameplay and narrative seperatly is a useful way to potray the qualities of a game to a reader, but beware that quality - when judging art - still is a subjective term most of the time. Make this your mantra:

Arbitrary numbers assigned to a subjective impression dont qualify as an objective measure.

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Even if you split it into two of those impressions...